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Like Water Like Stone, Before I Die: Reflections on Writing, Womanhood, and Personal Power

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A CREATIVE PROJECT

by

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SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Students

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Like Water Like Stone

A Novel

Prologue

Wisest

The old woman is tired. The weariness settles around her with the weight of a thousand blankets, rounding her shoulders and working its way into bones that ache with the cold of a never-ending winter. She is tired of trying to reach these people, tired of trying to convince them of the danger that even now approaches, gathering speed and ferocity unchecked. She sighs. The bowl in her lap tilts as she shifts her fatigued body in her seat. Splashes of clear water spill onto the polished floor to coalesce next to the old woman's chair. When the water in the bowl stills, she looks into it again, and the face reflected back at her is younger than her own has been in years, decades. The figure in the bowl smiles at someone Wisest cannot see. It is a female face, full-lipped. Dark hair is twisted into thick plaits that rest on narrow shoulders. The torso disappears beyond the edge of the water bowl. The dark hair ripples and there is a flash of golden light. Wisest blinks. Perhaps she imagined it. The face in the bowl is disappointingly ordinary after all.

"You are a conquered people. The time of your end is near." She speaks the words not only to herself but also to the people of the village, though they cannot hear. She is alone in her home, her only company the girl in the water-bowl who can neither see nor respond.

The old woman knows she has spent her time, that it is coming to an end. Someone like her, able to read the skies and see things in that mundane blue that others cannot, of course she knows that Death is stalking her ever closer. She has made her peace with it, with dying, but there is one thing yet. These people who are her people are not a people of this land. This land, this beautiful but foreign land accepted them for a time: only for a time, and now that time is coming to an end and these people, her people, are nearing their end if they do not once again bring the land under their dominion.

Wisest did not go looking for this knowledge. It came to her uncalled-for, in dreams when she lay in her bed tired from her days of healing and reading the skies. It came to her in visions. Without warning she would go into a trance, transfixed by the heart-wrenching screams of the horror yet to come. Bodies left bloated and abandoned to be swallowed, eventually, by the land. The fetid stench of defeat hanging in the air. She who could see, smell and hear across time and space was the only witness.

They have grown fat and complacent in the false peace their host nation has granted them, have indeed forgotten that this is not their land, so long have they been here. They have forgotten of the days of old when, the stories tell, battle-weary and broken by the miles they trekked ever northward seeking safety from the wrath of uNodumo, whose long reach and vengeful nature were without equal. When the wise men and women told the warriors what to do, they did it, wiping the blood off on leaves and with handfuls of grass when they were done. The sacrifices were made; the land welcomed them and the thing was done. Who would have known that it was not, after all, done once and for all?

Opening her eyes and leaning forward Wisest breathes onto the water-bowl on her lap, making the water ripple and then still. She hopes to see a different face this time, the face of one of the remaining elders in the other villages perhaps, a man at least, someone who can do what needs to be done. Maybe even the old woman from Sinyoka. She is not all that powerful, Wisest thinks, but certainly she would be better than this girl who is still a baby yet. It will be too many years before she is ready.

The girl's face appears slowly in the water. An unseen hand traces her features. A stroke here and a stroke there until finally she looks so real that for a moment Wisest thinks perhaps the girl can see her too. Her face is glowing with magic invisible to the untaught eye. Wisest is pleased that the girl is powerful. It will be a pleasure to teach her. She is outside somewhere, the old woman can see trees behind her. As if posing deliberately, the girl smiles at the old woman and her eyes and mouth widen as if she has heard something both shocking and funny. The girl's face shimmers in the bowl and disappears.

Wisest rubs her own face, perhaps thinking to wipe away the weariness that has settled in her bones. The girl again. It is true then. The old woman nods to herself, finally accepting what she is shown. Well, Sonto, the old woman thinks to herself, it is nice to see you.

Sonto

Tears fill my eyes and blur my vision as I try to write but I wipe them away before they can fall onto the page. My hand is shaky and the letters I form are uneven, some large and some small, some printed and others in cursive. One line slants to the left and the other to the right. It looks hideous. It has been too long since I have held a pen. My optimistic self, the one that took up this plan, is looking into the future when it is done. I do it that all may know the truth about what happened.

My pen falters and once again I am struck by my unsightly penmanship. I let that thought go. Nobody will ever know how much I suffered to form legible words before giving it up as a bad job and concentrating only on getting them down onto the page.

These days they have comedic writers, writers who say they are driven by a desire to make people laugh. I don't know about that. Funny books. Who reads books looking for *funny* instead of knowledge? Still, the world has changed and perhaps books serve a greater purpose than mere repositories of words, ideas and thoughts. Perhaps people can laugh and learn. What do I know?

I bleed to put these words down. The woman I have been winces at the scouring but it must be done. This work is re-opening old wounds and salting them. Each sentence written detailing each memory recalled feels like a barb drawing blood from my heart. Ras says I must fight, that I must write the story. He says that it will be good for me to face my demons and lay them to rest once and for all. He says these things kill from the inside out, that making the most painful, private memories public exposes them to the magic of the sun and cleans them of their poison. This is how painful things can be spoken about without grief overwhelming one. Airing takes their hurt away.

There is another reason why they want me to share my story. I pretend to believe that my healing is as important to them as it is to me. They want me to share my story because there are too few stories about Westers. Mine will add to those few, and then maybe someone else will want to tell a Wester story until one day, maybe not in my lifetime but one day, Wester stories will be as common as any other. I think that this is an important thing to want, but I cannot bring myself to care. I think that every story does not deserve to be told, and I am asking you if this one is worth telling.

The people of Wester rejoice whenever anything is published about them, no matter how brief the mention or how inaccurate the portrayal. When Big City published *A History of Central Republic*, a scribe came to Ekuthuleni, ostensibly to gather data for the publication.

Old women and old men sat with him and told him about the times before the Northers and before the war, when we were still a mighty nation, undefeated conqueror of the tribes that roamed in what is known today as *Central Republic*. They told the scribe about the raids that saw men slaughtered and boys and girls captured, given Wester surnames, and placed in Wester families. Over the decades that followed the Wester grew into a mighty and unified nation. All this was told to the scribes but when the book was published the kingdom of the Wester was referred to as *a small territory*. The battles against the Northers – in which the Northers were soundly thrashed – were called *skirmishes.* The section covering The Civil War (the war against Yster that the Wester lost because of Norther duplicity) is titled: *Central Republic Rises: Yster Unites Small Southern Tribes.* That is why Ras and the others and maybe even Wisest too, if she were here, all want me to tell the story. So that more people come to know the truth about what happened.

To the south and west the Great Desert thwarted Wester plans for expansion. In those days it was rumoured that there were lands beyond the desert and beyond the Mighty Waters that took grown men and never returned them. Not a single person who left Ekuthuleni to go beyond Mighty Waters came back. The stories say that our ancestors, forced into warrior-hood by uNodumo, became the conquerors of the savannah that lay beyond the Mother River, became the Wester when they stopped being wanderers. To cross the Mother River with uNodumo in hot pursuit, a pact was made with a water goddess. Ndoni ya Manzi would let them cross and prevent uNodumo and his army from doing the same, if they promised to reunite her with her lover, the god of the river, uNyami Nyami.

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The story of Ndoni ya Manzi and Nyami Nyami is one that is no longer told except perhaps in those academic circles that they have now, where they sit and talk about Wester fortunes but nothing ever comes of it except more talk. I find myself wondering what it is all for.

South of the Mother River they tell the story of Nyami Nyami and Ndoni ya Manzi, the water goddess. They lay claim to Ndoni and her bounty and indeed their side of the river is greener, more lush and verdant, but on the Wester side all is dry, dry-dry like the skin of a man without a wife, or the hair of a motherless daughter. Our kin in the south hold that when Nyami Nyami comes to Ndoni ya Manzi, it is they who will serve the divine couple and bask in the favour of the river goddess and her serpentine consort. We who settled north of the Mother River know that Nyami Nyami will never again travel southward.

The story of Ndoni and Nyami Nyami is a beautiful, sad tale. It happened millennia ago, when the world was young and still becoming itself. In those days when animals could talk – who says they could not? – in those long-ago days when the mountains were forming, when even the rocks were soft, *amatshe esancwebeka* as we would say, when the rocks were soft enough to pinch , in those days Ndoni ya Manzi was worshipped for she ruled over all the water in the world, the water in the sea and in the cup, and in all the living things. She roamed the world sometimes in her many water forms, and sometimes in the form of a maiden.

In those same days Nyami Nyami was the guardian of the west. He was set at the creation of the world to guard this land from foes coming over water. Now that was a question that troubled mankind for as long as the water goddess was worshipped: she would have known of any danger coming over water, so why was a guard set over the west?; there were no guards in the north or the east or the south. Well, an answer has not been found and so wherever the story is told it is told the same way: Nyami Nyami was set to guard the land in the west, and that is what he was doing when he met Ndoni ya Manzi, the water goddess.

Ndoni was a beautiful maiden, daughter of the Greatest Great One whose name only His children the Ancients may speak, and granddaughter of Ma, the Maker. Ndoni ruled over all the water of her world, the world bounded by the Great Water to the west, the Mighty Water to the south, and the Waters of Peace far away to the east where Njelele stood. Some said Ndoni's home was in the east and that's why Njelele was there, but in truth Ndoni's favourite place was the deep south and her home in Diphororo, where lay her favourite channel, the Mother River, flowing to the Waters of Peace. She travelled all over the world in her many water forms but she always came home to Diphororo.

In those days the world was young and people and gods lived closer to each other than they do now. Whenever the people danced and worshipped their gods, the deities would wear their world forms and dance and sing and laugh with them. Diphororo the water goddess, for that was the name Ndoni took in the south, especially loved the drumming and dancing. Flowers and fruit trees and fat heads of nourishing grains and grasses sprang up wherever her feet landed, the effect spreading for miles before it began to fade. Those who lived south of the Mother River, in the place Ndoni loved, were a prosperous people because of her dancing. She would mingle with the crowd and the other gods, her laughter trilling in the air, her sacred water falling on everyone around her. The lands were fertile, the cattle fat, there was peace and plenty.

At one such gathering, Ndoni met Nyami Nyami, the god whose responsibility it was to guard the western seaboard. Nobody knew what enemies Nyami Nyami awaited. He was a big man in his human form, towering over all others like a mountain, standing solid and unmoving and showing off a lithe grace that belied his size when he did move. As soon as Ndoni saw him she knew him by the water in him. It was sweet and good and Ndoni resolved to keep this god in the south with her. She seduced him, yes she did, and then she went to widen her channel so that he could leave his place on the western coast and join her. They would spend their time in the deep south in Diphororo, and when Ndoni needed space she would travel as she always had.

From the moment he saw Ndoni, Nyami Nyami was thoroughly and completely and forever in love. She shimmered and trembled at his touch and he melded into her, fiercely and unreservedly. Their pleasure was great, indescribable and right. The fact of their passionate union was announced in thunder and in lighting – water and power, you see. The whole world knew what they had done.

Nyami Nyami wanted to go to the Greatest Great One immediately, but Ndoni's father knew already, and He was very angry.

How dare Ndoni allow herself to be seduced by a lesser god. She who was a goddess in her own right, what did she see in a lesser being, a guard, not even a creator like she was? She could have had the god of the trees and the bushes and the plants, a creator like her, and together they would have ruled and the Greatest Great One would have gladly handed them all the lands as their domain. His anger was great, so he punished and separated the lovers – he caused a great desert to form between the west and the south so that the two water beings could never again see one another.

Ndoni ya Manzi was heartbroken and vowed never to leave her water form until she was reunited with her lover. She ignored the cries of the people, no matter how they called to her. Was it not all their fault? Were they not the ones who invited her to their ceremony? If they had not sung and danced and begged her appearance, she would not have gone to them. Embittered by the separation and blaming humans for her situation, she vowed from that day forth to destroy as many people as set foot in her waters. Never again would she allow free, safe passage across her many channels. Drownings had not existed before but suddenly became more and more common. Floods, too. Oceans, lakes and rivers would rise up and swallow people until they cried out to the Greatest Great One for mercy. He took pity on

them and created seasons so that they would know when to avoid the swollen rivers and the raging oceans. It was all He could do; He could no longer control His daughter.

Nyami Nyami is imprisoned beneath the Kariwa Stones and he tries every while or so to break through. He cannot. The enchantments are too strong. And even if he could, what then, for he could never cross the desert.

It was a cruel prison Ndoni's father wrought, and throughout aeons, millennia and centuries right down to today, Ndoni remembers the tragedy of her love story. Then she rages against humanity whom she still blames for what befell her. Unceasing rain falls in sheets until dams, rivers and lakes flood cities, towns and villages alike. She raises her waves as high as ten or even a hundred houses, and she causes rivers to overflow their banks and then when her anger is spent she is placid and peaceful. She thinks of Nyami Nyami and quietly mourns her loss, while the humans gather their dead in the aftermath of her fury.

***

It is said that Ndoni roused herself to speak with the ones who became the Wester when they approached the Mother River with uNodumo in hot pursuit. I will save you, she said to them, if you will give my lover Nyami Nyami a message to console him. Tell him I am faithful to him still.

The people who became the Wester did not know Nyami Nyami for the stories had died and been forgotten.

That is how the Great Desert came to be, and that is why when the Wester nation had become the Wester nation and needed room to grow, it had no option but to look northward, toward what later became Ysterland. The people who became Wester turned to the fertile lands of the north and made war there; izangoma and izinyanga designed the rituals and the tonics that assured victory. The Yster were gatherers and nomads, not warriors; they never stood a chance. The Yster fled further northward, toward their own capital where the Mambo ruled. The Wester warlords followed, conquering whomever they found in their path, slowly expanding Wester territory.

It was a heady time, I think. The hidden history books, the ones disallowed after the defeat and retreat of the Northers, speak of those who returned with maidens, young men, children, cattle and other livestock from the forefathers of today's Yster. We Westers, our forefathers at least, taught those scattered families the importance of clans and family. We taught them unity, government, civil responsibility to the greater good. We turned them from nonentities without identity eking out bare livings off the land, to fiefdoms living well,

creating wealth and leaving legacies. Industry flourished. The cattle husbandry that sustained the economy of Ekuthuleni was growing and wildly successful at every point. The herders who knew the best grazing places for each season were highly sought after and valued, they commanded huge amounts of wealth in exchange for their skill at keeping cattle, the primary source of wealth and status symbol. The tanners produced both leather for multiple uses and supplied the leather workers who in their turn produced beautiful bedding, shoes, coats and clothing. The Northers, when they came, brought us many new things in exchange for the leather, and Wester prospered even more. Trade was good and prosperity and peace were the order of the day. Then tragedy struck. Norther cattle brought to Wester a disease that wiped out the herds. Overnight, Wester was impoverished.

When resources are scarce, war flourishes. The Great Norther War followed, the war from whose ashes rose Central Republic, and that should have birthed a new Wester.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Sonto

Ekuthuleni lies six-hours' drive from Central Republic's capital, Big City, which is the premier city of Ysterland. In Wester there is no big city, just many small towns and villages, some better serviced than others. There is no rhyme or reason to which town has reliable water and electricity, and there is no telling where Yster officials might be lying in wait for malcontents. For anything official everyone must travel to Big City, the only exceptions are birth certificates and identity documents. For travel papers and for trading licences, and everything in between, Big City is the only option. This means that almost all the businesses in Ekuthuleni are run by traders from Yster who can easily get any documentation they need. The locals are relegated to consumers with little if anything to do with any of the systems under which they live. Wester is Central Republic's second and last province, and its poorest.

Ekutheleni is the most remote of Wester's settlements, the closest to the desert. It lies in a little valley isolated from the rest of Central Republic by the desert that stretches all the way to the western seaboard and the Great Water, the stormy ocean that marks the end of the world in the west. In the south winds the Mother River, serving as the border between Central Republic and the nations lying further south. They say that the southern nations are favoured and prosperous, and that the ocean at the southernmost tip of the continent is named Mighty Water even though it is the same water as the ocean on our western coast, which is named Great Water. Although they are our near-kin we do not deal much with the nations south of the Mother River. We are taught that our fallen cords are buried in this republic, and that any ties further south have long since shrivelled and disappeared. There are whisperings about the southern nations welcoming Wester citizens, but no one has returned with the truth of it though many have gone. Others say that the southern nations are preparing for war against Big City. They want to petition Mr President to let Wester secede, but any fool can see that that will never happen. Why should Big City give up its hold on Wester when Wester provides an audience for Yster flamboyance and ostentation, and a market for their inferior products? Manufacturing is all but dead in Wester. The difficulties of getting the right documents and of moving goods around without official travel documents had made Wester a beggar province. The Yster come in with their licenses, but they purchase goods in Yster for resale in Wester. Nothing is made here. Not anymore. No, it does not matter what is

happening in the south. We Wester have enough trouble at home with the Ysters. We don't need to be looking for trouble with other nations.

The names of the provinces might make you think that Central Republic is a perfect circle and its two provinces perfect hemispheres. This is not the case. Yster covers the north and north-east, and Wester the west and south-west. To the east and below Yster, Wester is mostly uninhabitable wilderness, and then mountains, then beyond the mountains the coast and the Waters of Peace. The Mother River flows eastward to the Waters of Peace, having risen somewhere in the desert mountains.

If you go travel north from Wester you will eventually reach Ysterland or simply Yster, the only other province. In this country you are either Wester or Yster, there is nothing else, and to be in-between is still to be one or the other; one cannot be both. Ysterland is a flat, uninteresting land of farmlands and rolling orchards, some horticulture; more crops than animal husbandry. But Big City, the capital, is a hub of trade and industry. Wester of course is and always has been the seat of the cattle and leather industries. We don't just grow things in Wester, we tame animals. Further north, beyond Central Nation's borders, lie the northern nations. The Yster deal with the north, trading for goods and such – when the war ended and the relationship became one of diplomacy and profit.

***

My oldest memory is from when I was five years old. The years before my fifth birthday are shrouded in darkness so thick and impenetrable that nothing has ever been able to pierce it. Later, when I was grown, they tried to get the memories out of my head. They said my origins and the story of my birth held secrets that would make my practise better somehow. I let them try. Why not?

I have tried to access my memories on my own. I even once dared to ask the Ancients. That did not go as well as you might expect. Asking questions about your past from beings that are answerable only to the Greatest Great One sounds like a good idea only in fantasy stories. They told me nothing. I went before Ma herself after I tried the healers I could find. If anyone could heal my mind, surely it would be people who made a living doing just that: healing. That's what I thought, and I was wrong. The medicines were bitter, the trances they put me in made my head swim and my body ache, but nothing ever came of it. So when I had a chance, I petitioned Ma. Eventually I gave up. I know healers who can go so far back as to

describe events they heard while in the womb. I can only remember as far back as my fifth birthday.

That memory is incredibly bright and vivid. It feels like falling into time. I can feel the sun on my back, still one of my favourite sensations. I can feel the warmth radiating back from the bricks I'm sitting on, rubble left over from when my father Monday added an extra room to our house, taking it from three rooms to four, making us the envy of the neighbours. I hear what I now recognise as fear threading through my mother's voice as she cries out, pleading with me to come to her. Her eyes are so wide there's white showing all around her irises. Her arms are outstretched and her voice, that note of fear even clearer now that I know what it is, quavers with urgency and horror. Let me start at the beginning.

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On the day of my fifth birthday I was playing on the pile of rubble left by renovations to our house. When you're five, there is much joy to be found in climbing up and down a pile of broken bricks anchored in builders' sand. I'd made it to the top of the pile for the umpteenth time and sat there surveying my land – the backyard – when Mother interrupted my play with screams.

"Sonto! O Ancients!" Her voice is high and panicky, she dances about in the doorway but makes no move to come closer.

I sit on my pile of bricks and watch this strange spectacle, wondering at her inexplicable, unfathomable screams. I don't recall if there is anyone else present, my mother fills my memory to the exclusion of almost all else. She is shouting something but her speech is garbled by the sobbing, and her gestures, though frantic, are indecipherable to me. I giggle.

I am frightened when she falls to her knees and begins sobbing. Only then do I move to climb down from my tower. Tears brim and roll down her cheeks. That's when I notice the snake on my lap. Its creamy rose-tinted scales give off a fishy scent, neither pleasant nor particularly horrid, and strangely evocative of water. I half-expect the scales to be damp and clammy but they are cool and dry beneath my fingers. Muscles ripple as I stroke the writhing reptile. I feel no fear, only wonder and the weight of the serpentine body coiling onto my lap.

"Woza nana, woza ku Mama." Her voice is softer now. I scramble down and when I am within grabbing distance I fins myself enfolded in her arms as she weeps over me, murmuring my name over and over again. Where the snake went I don't recall. It was there, and then it wasn't there.

That is my oldest memory.

When my father came home that night my parents took me to Sanuse the healer and told him about the snake. Sanuse, scary with his shiny bald head and his eyes like fried eggs, asked me to tell him what happened.

"I was just playing and then she started crying and then we waited for my father to come home and then they brought me here." I spoke quickly, the words coming out in a rush because I wanted to be done with this strange man with yellow eyes and shiny skin. I wanted to be back home with my parents.

"She doesn't mention a snake." Sanuse turned his big yellow eyes on my mother. My father shuffled on the goatskin mat but said nothing.

"It was there. I saw it. She stroked it! I don't know why she's lying!" My mother, her voice catching. "It was big. And creamy pink-like. Golden eyes." She stops.

I watch the healer, my heart in my throat. What will he do to me?

Nobody speaks for long moments and then Mother adds, "It was coiled in her lap. It was just there, I don't know where it came from or where it went. It was just there!" Her voice rises on that last word, as if she can feel disbelief in the air.

Sanuse looks at me without speaking. I want to look at his yellow eyes, yellow like the yolk of an egg, yellow that errs on the side of orange. I want to look into his eyes but something about him repels me and I can't meet his gaze.

Outside, the sun is setting. Golden beams pierce the decorative holes in the wall and slice the air so that it lands in a pattern of squares on the concrete floor, casting everything in warm orangey tones. I put out my hand to cast shadows on the floor but my mother nudges me and I settle, still avoiding the healer's eyes. His skin is very pale, paler than anyone else in Ekuthuleni. It is a muddy beige and oddly shiny, like he has just enough skin and no extra, not even for elbows and knees. Even his hands are shiny, as if he has no knuckles.

"Hrmm hrmm." The healer clears his throat. "She was in no danger. What you saw was an albino sand-snake, a well-known sign of the Ancients' favour." He turns to me so suddenly that I am startled, but his next question is also addressed to my mother. "Why did you scream?" His words are slow and measured, his voice neither too deep nor too high.

"It was a snake, that's all I saw." Mother's voice sounds like it does when she is annoyed with me.

I glance at my father. He has said nothing and still remains silent.

“Anyway,” she continues, “I didn’t do anything to it. I just called her to me and we came to you soon as Monday got home. Didn’t we, Monday?” She elbows my father, her tone pleading.

My father only nods.

“Perhaps the child is marked,” says Sanuse.

Silence.

Then my father speaks. “Nkosikazi, let’s go. Siyabonga, Baba, thank you.”

Sanuse nods and stands as my parents and I get up from the goastkin mat. My father holds out a hand to me and I grab it, hoping he will put me on his shoulders as he sometimes does.

“Monday, we haven’t asked if there’s anything we should do. What if she needs special –?”

The question hangs in the air, unfinished and unanswered. Sanuse leads the way out of the hut and into the twilight. The sky is darkening but there is still light enough to make out shapes, if not features. In the falling dark my father looms large and I feel small and safe standing next to him, my little hand completely engulfed in his big one. My mother takes his other hand.

“Thank you, Baba,” my father says again. His grip tightens on my hand and he steps towards the gate, my mother and I a step behind, flanking him.

“Look after her well.” The old man turns and walks towards his house that sits in the middle of the yard. The healing hut, isigodlo, is left open and unattended.

My father scoops me up and cradles me against his chest. My mother, who has been forced to let go of my hand, quickens her pace to catch up.

“Monday, what does it mean? He didn’t tell us anything!”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about, woman. Asambeni.”

I say nothing. I am enjoying being carried in my father’s arms.

Chapter 2

Sonto

My parents named me Sonto, which means *day of the sun*. I know of only two other Sontos and both were already dead by the time I was born. One was my great-grandmother of whom I know nothing but her name, and the other is a character in one of the folktales with which we were entertained as children. The Sonto of Wester lore was introduced to me as I sat on a grass mat, eager and agog with excitement at the rare opportunity to hear the old women take turns telling stories. My mother didn't often let me attend, she said it was all filthy fables, and I would be better off reading the Paradise Literature that the Norther traders distributed. The Paradise Literature meant boring parables but the stories the old women told were about history and myth, and were full of adventure and treachery and old, old magic. My father was not back from work and I had snuck out of the house to avoid yet another argument with my mother. I knew I would be in trouble when I got home but I did not care.

The day had been hot as the days of high summer always were. It would be many more months before low summer, the other season of the year. Low summer is the rainy season, characterised by afternoon showers and, when the sun is out, spontaneous village dances at igceke lemihlangano, the place of meeting, to give thanks for the rain and remind the Ancients not to send too much. Low summer is the only time of the year when anyone is allowed to visit igceke; in high summer it is strictly forbidden to go there except when invited by the village elders for official village builders. In low summer the children who are old enough to be home alone but too young to be put to work ploughing, weeding and planting, spend their morning there. The sand of igceke turns to a firm clay that keeps its shape when dry, and the children shape mud into little dome structures using their feet as moulds. These little huts are decorated with twigs and stones and populated with clay people and clay animals and soon a little Ekuthuleni springs up, and village stories are reenacted in that natural amphitheatre. It is hard not to miss those happier times of Ekuthuleni. Perhaps it is harder to share my memories as I do now.

What use is there in speaking of how in the afternoons of low summer the older children played umareyitshana with homemade balls, or how their shrieks of laughter, when they scored, and their howls of fury, when they missed, filled the village air. On the third evening of the week, Olwesithathu, the adults took over the space, bringing mats and stools and benches and talking long into the night or until someone remembered the morning's

fieldwork, and then they would say their goodnights and walk towards their homes, slowly and with the soft laughter and the friendly "Till morning!" civilities of a community at peace. There were many rules about the use of igceke. It was the village's most sacred space after all, but in low summer all the rules were relaxed because rules meant transgression, and Ekuthuleni went to great lengths to eliminate trouble in the rainy season. It is not good to have conflict in low summer. The Ancients might cease to bring the rain and then the crops will not grow and the river will not flow and the animals will move away. Even pregnant women who are close to their time must leave if the birth is expected in the rainy season, just in case. There can be no mourning gatherings in low summer, it is the worst time to lose a loved one.

There are stories about years when it rained non-stop for so long that the crops rotted in the fields and the people all but starved until the next harvest; and years when the rain did not come at all. Unceasing rainfall or prolonged drought is how the Ancients punish the people. Monday used to say that the rains that came at the right time and in the right way were proof that the Ancients wished us well for another year. We never had parties in my house but every year my family slaughtered a goat when the first rains came, to thank the Ancients for getting us through the old year and for prosperity in the new. The rains would come and then eventually the intervals between showers would get longer until it was many days since the last one. When that happened the village elders would gather and the healer, whose job it was to keep track of the seasons, would tell the council if seven days had passed since it last rained. If the answer was yes, the news would be taken to the people, who would prepare for the final village-wide dance of gratitude, a feast to end the season.

The council would slaughter an animal, goat or cow depending on how generous they felt, which would be roasted and stewed and served in great big wooden bowls made especially for village feasts. The old women who made isgodokhaya would bring it out and pretend not see young wives sipping stealthily from bowls and mugs between serving runs. It was a night of merriment and good times, so what if a young wife was a little happier than usual? Her husband would appreciate it and in nine months so would her mother-in-law. After that, the days would become warmer and drier and then high summer would be back in its blazing glory.

High summer was my favourite season. Long, hot days and no rain, just blessed, blessed heat. My memories of summers spent in Ekuthuleni are bathed in a sepia tone, like pictures in a stranger's album, rather than of my past. I don't remember anything that

happened before I turned five and I remember only bits of what came after. Perhaps, when they urge me to write, Ras and the others are hoping to trick me into revealing more about who I was before. This is not that story.

Chapter 3

Wisest

It amazes me that there are people in this world who think evil only walks at night, not knowing that it is as ever-present as the very air they breathe.

What knowledge we once had, what wonders will now never be known, all because we are twice conquered. First by the Northers, the pale ones who came bearing gifts of war from the north, and then by the Ysters, with the evil the Northers had taught them. The Northers came and as the wise man from the faraway place wrote, they came and they put a knife on the things that held us together. Have we not fallen apart?

The Northers came and took away our elders who knew the old ways and they were never seen again. They say our elders were shut away in rooms with barred windows and left to die. There was no one to hear their stories and carry their wisdom into the coming times. The ones who came after soon forgot that they were the seed of those who followed the stars and the moon. I looked up one day and we were the old ones, and then I was the only old one, the only one who still remembered. That's when the Yeoman came.

The Yeoman, the farmer who dared title himself Sanuse, performed his rituals at night. Had my people known their past, remembered their own magic and how to wield it, they would not have been taken in by the pomposity and theatrics and low-grade sorcery. Had they known who they were, they would have known that this man whose skin was turning yellow – yellow, not golden – was nothing but a charlatan. Sometimes I pity them, but most times I am angry.

The stories came back after a time; they survived as stories do but they were different. I watched history rewritten. I was alive when the Northers came and I have lived to see my people subdued yet again, this time by the ones from the east, but when the stories came back they said that the land had been sold for a ration of sugar. I have seen the mats that come from the north, they are as common now as cow and goatskin mats were when I was a girl. It is as though they have been forced to return to the ways of their fathers, but this time without the old ones to guide them in those ways.

I have seen Ekuthuleni shrink from being a town of mighty and upright reputation to become a village of old, gossipy women and their weak husbands and grandchildren. I clearly see the ones who feed upon them njengobhoklanti, like lice. It amazes me that people still think evil walks only in the night, when they see it smile in broad daylight.

***

Sonto appeared in my water bowl when I was already an old, old woman. There was no one alive in Ekuthuleni who knew me before I became old. I had lived a long lifetime or perhaps many little ones – does it matter? I had spent enough time in the Temple of the East, which lies outside of time, to know how to talk about the Norther War and the other things that happened, the other wars, the ones of which no one speaks, as if I was alive when they happened. I have been waiting that long.

I have been watching the skies for what I'm sure are several centuries yet is not nearly so long; I was young but not a child when the first of the Northers arrived. First they came by water from the West but the desert proved impenetrable. Then they came by water from the East but they could not find their way through the mists, over the mountains and into the interior. They were named Northers for they came from the north, their real name has since been lost, like all the other true names that have been lost.

So I waited. I watched the skies and waited. I sent messages to the temple and even when I heard nothing back I waited and I watched. Years turned to decades and there were times I did not watch as diligently as I should have, but I did not leave, I did not stop waiting. I saw the terror in the skies but what could I, a woman alone and an old one at that, what could I do? Then the time came when the scent of Death hung in the air, like rust and blood and rotting things.

***

The first time Sonto came to my attention was when Nali came home after visiting her for the first time. Nali, my friend and my guide.

"How do you not understand the risk you took? Why would you be so careless as to be seen?" I was unhappy. The times were dangerous. I had seen everything through Nali's eyes. I had seen the child, five or six, and witnessed her mother's anguish. My heart had leapt in my chest. Finally, she was shown to us! But my joy disappeared like morning dew. Her fool mother chose instead to take the child to the Yeoman because she too fell for the lie of his name.

Nali slithered around the hut, her scales making rhythmic scratchy sounds on the raw concrete floor. Kssh-Kssh, kssh-kssh. As always I was mesmerised by the sinuous movement, her yellow and brown stripes flowing with an unearthly grace and a beauty that was almost voluptuous. One or two of the villagers had caught sight of the sacred snake and recognised her markings. There had been whispers. That's when I insisted she present as an albino

anywhere she might be seen. The superstitious villagers were more likely to ignore an albino snake than one they recognised as a messenger of the Ancients. The teachings of the North had taken hold and anything that was not approved by the Ministry of Religion in Yster was considered occult practice, participation in which was punishable with a jail term. My years of waiting in Ekuthuleni were also years of hiding, of pretending to be no more than another old woman. Those who remembered did so in silence. Sanuse on the other hand came with qualifications and certificates from Yster, which called him a holistic healer. I had scoffed over this with Nali. Their gullibility is yet another reason why I struggle to find pity for these people.

None of that mattered when the child was found, though. I needed to do what I had been placed here to do. It was time to become more than the strange old woman who lived alone and was often seen staring at nothing in the sky.

Nali crossed the room to her basket and I forgot what I was saying as my eyes followed the twisting form from one end of the hut to the other. When she got to the basket she lifted her body up and coiled herself into it, her movements unhesitant and sure until she was inside with her head on the edge, her yellow eyes turned to me.

Her voice was just as smooth as it had always been. It was impossible to be angry with Nali for too long.

"What could be worse than being stoned? I was not seen by any except the mother and child. In any case, I am fine as you can see for yourself. I fail to understand these dramatics of yours."

I felt a bit embarrassed by my hysteria. The people were superstitious and foolish, yes, but most still knew better than to provoke the local witch, for such I have come to be called, by harming a snake in her vicinity. A brief flash of fear follows that thought. What will happen when no one is alive to remember? Will such a time truly come? I had seen signs in the skies of a time when nobody knew how to sky-read anymore, a time when snakes, even the sacred sand snakes such as Nali was, were seen as enemies and not guides. I shuddered, icy fear trailing down my spine like sweat. I recalled what I'd seen in the skies and smelled in the air, the blood and the screams – but first, I needed to know why Nali had risked so much to see the child. Could she truly be the one I had been waiting for? Before I could ask, the smooth voice was in my head again, reverberating against my skull.

“There’s nothing you can do about it. The child is too young to learn anything and by the time those things you see come to pass, you and I will be long gone from here. So why worry?”

She tucked her diamond-shaped head below the rim of the basket and out of sight, leaving me to figure out the significance of her words on my own.

From the top of the wardrobe I took down the carved wooden bowl Nali had slept in when she was a little snakelet, and I filled it with water. I needed to see for myself what was so special about this child. Sonto. Her name was Sonto. Child of the sun. No, day of the sun. When the girl’s face appeared in the bowl I was taken aback, so perfect were her features, so smooth her skin and clear her eyes.

Several days passed. I let go of the hope that Sonto’s mother would bring her to me. Nali was out hunting and I was alone when I decided to take another look at Sonto. Perhaps I would see something that would help me decide what to do next. She was a child of course, but now that I knew the wielder was here, I would have to find a way to begin teaching her.

The truth is that I had not believed I would see another wielder; I had long ago given up hope. Watching Sonto in the bowl I was surprised and pleased when I saw the rings around her irises. The golden outline would not be visible to anyone else unless she was actually channeling, and untaught as she was – she was so young! – I knew that no one in the village knew what she was. Not even her own mother. Fool woman.

Chapter 4

Sonto

The rumours, that the smaller villages of Wester were being attacked and of villagers surviving in the nearby forests or drowning in the Mother River to flee pursuit, had been trickling in for months. The latest had come from a young man who barely made it to igceke before collapsing. For two days he survived only on the thin porridge fed to him while he lay only half awake. I was there when the elders called him to give his account. The story he told was short, or perhaps he did not need to say more than he did.

The people in the capital said that the Wester were plotting with the Northers to take the country. That the villages, especially the remote ones, were training camps for soldiers who would not protect Central Republic, but whose mission was to turn Yster into a province of Wester. Such things had been said before and no one had paid attention. The man said it was too late, the only solution was to flee because the Yster soldiers were not taking prisoners. The elders looked grim. Someone said if only Wisest could speak from beyond the grave to tell us what the Ancients required. Then someone suggested calling Sanuse.

As a healer he did not attend village meetings unless invited. Sanuse was asked to attend the meeting and he shuffled in on slow feet, his skin even yellower than usual. Monday has pushed to the front of the crowd of gathered villagers, pulling me with him. I was close enough to see the cracks around Sanuse's mouth.

Ekuthuleni sits right on the edge of the desert. Perhaps we were too far away for the soldiers to come all this way. But if they were destroying remote villages, how much more remote was it possible to be? Perhaps they would come, find no camp of any sort, and leave us alone. At this, the older men and women snorted. Remember that time, they asked? Remember that time they said the same things, and then the war came? They shook their heads. We are done for. It is now only a matter of a time.

For what happened in those times you will have to go to the Histories. I can only speak to what I lived through. Sanuse did not say much. He only nodded a few times, assured us all that he would make the villagers' requests known to the Ancients, and then he excused himself, saying he needed to begin his preparations if he was going to supplicate on our behalf. I remember that word because it was the first time I had heard it and I repeated it to myself to ask Monday later. But I did not remember to ask until it was too late.

***

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” When he spoke the things that lay hidden in his heart, my father would always stroke his beard. It was a signal to my mother and me not to argue or ask questions for he would not indulge us. He would say his piece and be silent until the next time he was moved to open a tiny crack and give us a peep at his private thoughts.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he said, his face grim. “It has been a bitter-sweet victory against the North,” he continued, shaking his head. “We exchanged tyranny from the North for tyranny from the East.”

Chapter 5

Sanuse

The man had walked into the room to find the woman mystic sprawled on the floor, her water-bowl overturned on the shiny concrete floor. Water puddled around the chair, swirling pink where it made contact with the blood. It was easy enough to see how the old woman had slipped and hit her head. The bowl itself was still intact and lay on its side near her, a tiny bit of water remaining in its bottom. He would leave it there, he could always come back for it later. Wisest had always refused to show him how to work it and now he would have time to learn at his leisure. He smiled, and then he winced as the cuts around his mouth protested the movement.

The room was as bare as it had always been, the concrete floor polished to a high shine except for the rough unpolished squares set at angles that crossed the expanse and ran around the edges of the room. On the far side of the room, right where the unpolished squares came to an end, stood a low, wide grass basket, empty. The man's lip curled. Was the snake on its way home, or had it just left? Did it know that its mistress was in distress? The snake unnerved him, with its sibilant voice intruding into his thoughts whenever he wanted to talk to Wisest. Go away, Yeoman, it would hiss in his head, and quite against his will he would find himself telling Wisest he would see her some other time. He was never sure whether the snake said Yeoman or yellow man, either way he did not like it. It made him feel small, exposed and powerless. It didn't help that he never quite knew whether to call Nali an *it* or a *she*. He had never asked Wisest if she was aware of how the snake insulted him and since she never mentioned it, he had had to content himself with avoiding her so as to avoid the snake.

Now he was here. He didn't want to be, but he had to confront the old woman about sending the snake to the girl, there was no avoiding that. He knew that Nali was the snake Sonto and her mother had seen. There was no evidence to prove it of course, but he knew it was Nali and he would not stand for the witch's meddling. He had been warned to leave her alone but this, this was too much! If Sonto was the wielder – why else would the snake approach her – then it was his job to keep her safe until his masters gave him instructions. He had come to Ekuthuleni for this, and no one would stand in his way.

It bothered him that there had been no response to his urgent message to Big City, but when he thought about it, he knew he shouldn't expect one. After all, the child was still young, untaught, and as long as he kept the old woman away from her there was no reason to

worry. He had been wise to begin working on the parents as soon as he arrived. His work had paid off. They trusted him like a priest just because he showed them his certificates from the Association of Traditional Healers, so it made sense that Sonto's mother had consulted him and not Wisest.

The masters had told him this would happen. That once the wielder was identified things would move quickly, and they had. Within days, the Ancients were speaking in his dreams. His moments of doubt meant nothing now, he knew he was in the right place, doing the right things. He didn't have to guess anymore.

His skin had changed, too. Everyone knows that the colour of the sun is the colour of magic, and his yellowing skin was nothing but proof of his status as a great healer. He had been right to name himself Sanuse, greatest of all wielders and all healers. He glanced again at the old woman. The witch's skin was a glowing golden brown, she seemed lit from within. He snorted. Some village trickery she and her snake dreamed up. She had been wise to stay out of his way these many years, and he was here to tell her to keep it that way. This was the old woman's isgodlo he knew, but it had been many years since anyone came to consult.

Sanuse had done his work well. A well-placed question here, a comment there, and soon enough the village began to wonder if an old woman who had never had an acolyte even knew anything. He let it be known that Big City frowned upon charlatans who practised healing without the appropriate licence. He made sure that the villagers knew that Big City frowned upon any practices not approved by the state.

Apart from the basket and a couple of grass mats rolled up next to it, the chair and the overturned bowl were the only things in the round room. Well, the only things if one ignored the dying woman. The man's eyes had come back to rest on the figure on the floor and he wondered what she would do if he walked over, righted and then sat in her chair. Nothing. She was beyond responding to anything. But he wouldn't sit in the chair. It's not that he was afraid of her, it was just that he had some things to say.

The room was aglow, illuminated by the golden light centred on the woman. She lay face down, her head turned to one side with one arm outstretched, the other twisted beneath her body. She had hit her head on the hard concrete and the blood flowed, pooling around her head, staining her silvery hair scarlet. The blood on the floor reflected the gold light and an answering golden glow bathed the old woman's skin. Her face was unlined but her hair, silvery white, thick and loose, told her great age. The strands held their own lustre but they also took on the golden light streaming from her body which shone whiter and brighter near

her head. The strands that lay in blood turned iridescent and sparkled, for the blood that stained them held a magic of its own. Her hand, long fingers curling and uncurling as she tried and failed to find purchase on the smooth floor, was as bronzed as her face. Every visible inch of skin shone with the same golden light that filled the room. Her hand stilled and then came to rest palm down on near her head. Sanuse stood by the door and watched, considering his next move.

As if feeling his gaze, the old woman's eyes opened. When their eyes met the knowledge that her wound would be fatal if she did not soon get help bloomed between them, along with one other fact: he would choose not to help. The woman let her eyes close.

The man watching her stepped further into the room and came to kneel beside her. He was careful to avoid the blood spreading on the floor but for a second it held his gaze. Sparks danced above it, pinpoints of golden light whirling and floating before disappearing to be replaced by others in a constant play of golden flickers. He was not surprised; she was a magic-wielder. Of course her blood would show signs of her magic. He knew the magic would leave the blood soon. It was just a matter of time.

His yellow eyes sparkled; his skin brought its own shade of bright yellow to the light filling the room. The magic in the air made his skin prickle and he felt his scalp tighten. He rubbed his hands over his bare arms and then lowered them, annoyed with himself. He hated to admit that the magic in the air raised goosebumps on his arms. When he knelt at the woman's head she didn't flinch, although her eyes were open again, but when he brought his face close to hers to whisper in her ear, she could not hide the slight grimace. He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, jerking it back when the thick white strands of her hair flowed away from his touch. He considered this. He shrugged and put it down to yet more of her magic and brought his hand down to rest on his knee. No need to worry. She would be nothing but a story soon.

Her ear had been exposed by her hair's movement, its delicate whorls glowing golden like the rest of her. She really was a handsome woman, even now, and he allowed himself a moment of fantasy. She would have been fantastic in bed, together they might have made a different kind of magic. No, perhaps not. She was much too old, had been too old for a long time, and anyway it was too late to consider that now. Women could ensnare a man, make him weak, and he had worked too hard and too long to risk giving it all up for a woman. Oh no, that would never do. No. He was safe, his secret was safe, and the only person who might have discovered it lay dying before him. The finality of that last thought brought him back to

the present. He leaned closer to whisper in the woman's ear, noting without compassion her slow raspy breathing. It would not be long now.

"I know your snake revealed herself to the girl."

The woman did not respond. Her closed eyes did not open. The man smiled his satisfaction. They thought they were so clever sending the snake, but had the Ancients not brought the information to him? Had the girl's parents sought Wisest when umhlwazi showed up in their yard? No, they had not. They had made a choice and they had chosen him. The girl's parents came to him because *he* was the right one, because the Ancients had entrusted *him* with the girl, not Wisest and the snake. He winced as he recalled the diamond-shaped head, the golden scales and the sinuous movement that always made him queasy. He shook himself. No need to go there. Nali was not here and inviting her into his mind was not something he wanted to do.

"Where is she anyway, your Nali?" He said the name with a sneer. "Will she come save you?"

As soon as he said the words he wished he had not. They were beneath him. Such pettiness was not worthy of the only healer in Wester. He smiled to himself at the sweetness of the title. It was finally true. He really was Sanuse, the greatest of the great healers. Now he could wear the title and not feel it chafe as it had when he first started using it. Now it was real.

The air in the room shimmered and Wisest smiled back at him. Her eyes had opened just in time to catch the smile he could not help give, and incredibly she had returned it. Probably losing touch with reality, the man concluded. Hallucinating. Head injuries could do that. He was leaning over to whisper into her ear again but she spoke first.

"You do not know what will come." Her voice was faint but held no tremor. "Wisdom beyond what you call wisdom. You would have found it had you not been so greedy and blind to the truth."

Sanuse noted the old woman's growing weakness with a twinge of regret. So much knowledge would die with her; irreplaceable knowledge. As much as it galled, the Yeoman – he would soon make sure everyone forgot that name – had to admit that Wisest knew ways of magic that he would never know. The scholar in him was saddened by the loss but, well, sacrifices had to be made if one was to serve the Ancients. Better to let her die.

"Old woman, you and that child would have destroyed everything my ancestors worked for. This is our land and we will take it back – all of it, and you will not stop us.

Nobody will." He still knelt beside her, carefully not touching her or the blood. She answered him, but her eyes remained closed and he had to lean closer to hear her words.

"You." She spoke slowly. "You are – a fool."

The old woman's words turned into a weak cough and Sanuse watched her struggle to swallow and breathe. He made no move to help, made no move at all. Despite her obvious pain she was still Wisest, and Sanuse could feel the waves of her power flutter over him despite her weakened state. He was baffled by the lack of urgency in the power that touched him. She did not direct her power, she was not even trying to use it to save her own life. It was simply there, filling the room. It was Wisest's unused power that cast the golden light on everything, he now knew. Of course. It was not her impending death that was responsible for the surreal glow as he had at first thought. It was the presence of unused magical energy. His own power was tightly held; he would not use it against her. That was unnecessary.

It's not like I killed her, Sanuse was thinking to himself. She was on the floor already dying and, well, what was I supposed to do? His thoughts raced. Nobody could blame him, but better if nobody knew he had ever been here. Calm down. Think. She was on the floor when I got here. I have not touched her. I am not to blame for this. The Ancients will commend me for not interfering in their plans. Yes. That was it.

"Old woman!" He leaned in again, his voice a fierce whisper. He put out a hand to shake her but when her thick white hair rippled away from his touch a second time, he withdrew.

He called her name. Ssh. Not too loudly. It would not do to have someone come in and find him kneeling next to the dying healer. Oh no. That would not do at all.

"No, old woman. You are the fool," he hissed. Now that he'd convinced himself of his innocence his confidence was back. "Don't you see? You and the girl –." He fell silent and pinched the bridge of his nose with the fingers of one hand. "It is best this way. It is the will of the Ancients."

Wisest's eyes remained closed and Sanuse wondered if he would face death with such peace and resignation. She was too powerful to die this way. He knew it, even if the villagers did not. Then he smiled again, a small thin smile that did not reach his eyes. The Ancients would have their way no matter what one did. Here, a bit of water on a slippery floor was all it took to achieve their ends. He could not help sighing once more at the loss of knowledge. But no matter really. He, Sanuse, would learn. The Ancients would teach him and as the only healer in the province, he was guaranteed a long life. The smile slid off its place to be

replaced by a frown. He wiped his face with one hand as if to clear his thoughts. What to do about the girl? Aha. When the time came, he would send her away. Easy enough to do, he had her parents' confidence, the mother's at least, and there would be no Wisest to give a second opinion. Yes. Send her far away. That would be best.

Wisest lay motionless, her eyes closed. If not for a quiver in the hollow below her ear she could easily have been mistaken for dead. She could feel her strength slowly leaving her and a new warmth filling her limbs. The warmth flowed upward from her toes and as it did, she grew weaker and her breathing slowed. She was ready.

Sanuse knew when the old woman's spirit left her body. The tang of magic left the air; he no longer had to hold his body stiff against her power. The air cooled instantly and the light dimmed. The golden light didn't dissipate or fade. It was there and then it was gone; all that remained was the dead body on the floor with its halo of congealing blood. Sanuse waved an experimental hand above her head and watched the hair ripple as if it was alive and still wanted nothing at all to do with him, not even in death.

He stood, wiped his hands on his robes and bowed his head in prayer, committing Wisest's spirit to the Ancients. Wiping his hands once more and with one final glance at the corpse, the yellow man made his way out of the hut, round the back, and into the thicket that lay behind Wisest's home, melting into the twilight.

The man made it away without incident. When he eventually circled back to the houses, no one could have said he had ever been anywhere near Wisest's hut that day. He had enough roots and leaves and bark stripped from trees to make his herb-gathering alibi plausible should anyone ask. No one did.

His walk down Ekuthuleni's dusty streets toward his own home at the opposite end of the village was punctuated by cries of "Litshonile, Baba, good evening!" from the villagers and their children. When he finally made it through his own gate he heaved a sigh of thanks. A little three-legged stool stood on his veranda and he carefully lowered himself onto it; its legs were uneven and he did not want to fall. He was still contemplating his future as the only sangoma living in Wester when a little girl ran through the gate and up the little path. Her hair was in two thick Nguni braids which made the man smile. So many women cut their hair like men these days, it was pleasing to see evidence of a family that followed the old ways and let girl-children grow their hair. He was in a good mood when he turned his smile on the girl. Everything was right in his world and whatever was wrong he could fix.

“My child. I know.” The little girl’s eyes widened for she had not said anything, had not even greeted him before he spoke. He smiled at the child’s consternation. So easily impressed, these people.

“Wisest is of my blood, sangoma blood. Of course I know. Now run home, your job is done.”

The little girl stood a moment longer and then, turning, she ran back across the yard and out the gate without ever saying a word.

Chapter 6

Sonto

One night, the soldiers came.

Wester plot to topple the government uncovered! **Snakes and cockroaches in the Republic!**

Kill the parent snake! Eradicate snakes from Central Republic!

In the night, with no warning besides rumours of rumours, the soldiers came.

No Bullets Wasted On Cockroaches and Snakes!

Couples were slain in their homes as their children watched. Women and girls were raped. Pregnant women had their bellies sliced open. Boys were maimed, crippled so that even if they wanted to, they could never go to war. In the village of Ekuthuleni, once a modern and bustling town, not a single adult male survived, except Sanuse the healer.

The child of a snake is a snake. If allowed to live, snakes breed more snakes!

There were so many sounds that night. Screams. Cries of terror. The raucous laughter of the soldiers and the shouted orders of their commanders. Everywhere the smell of blood.

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Monday, my father, opened the door. They knocked him to the floor. Stuck a bayonet in his chest. My mother screamed and ran to him.

I stood there not understanding what was happening, not knowing why my mother was keening, rocking back and forth over my father's body, uncaring about the pool of blood connecting them in his death as their love had in his life. The soldiers had frozen at her first scream but now they surged forward to stand with the one who had stabbed, harsh voices speaking words I couldn't understand.

Hands reached for her, grabbing and tearing her clothing. Still I stood, mute. Her wailing became sharp cries of pain and then there were no more voices and no more grunting. A long knife in her belly.

I heard a rushing in my ears and my vision blurred. The soldiers became ghoulish figures, cackling and licking bloody lips, arms outstretched towards me. I knew I should run but I could not. I could not even summon a scream. The heat began at the back of my neck and spread across my back, down my arms and into my legs, raising goosebumps. I felt chilly and overheated at once. I wanted to vomit. A deep red light filled the room. Then all around me, blackness.

Chapter 7

Sonto

I was seven years old when I got my first kiss and it wasn't a shy peck on the cheek from an awkward boy making his first forays into adulthood. No, my first kiss at age seven was from a man. I don't know how old he was; he was just another grown-up. He was big and light-skinned, the colour of homemade fudge, that in-between colour that you see mostly among the Northers. If there's a reason why I have never once taken a light-skinned lover, he is it. Let me not get ahead of myself.

My father, Monday, was a gruff man. He rarely smiled except at my mother, and at me when I said something that pleased him. To my mother and me Monday was the glue that held us together, the centre of the home and the sun of our lives, the only thing Mother and I had in common, the one for whose attention we vied against each other. I called him by his first name because he loved me most of all, he would say, and it made no sense that everybody could use his name but me. My mother of course disapproved, and that is why she was always Mother and never Langa, her given name. She was the sun of my father's life, he said, and I was the child of the sun and a sun in my own right. So they named me Sonto. I loved my name until I learned that I got it as a derivative of my mother's.

Growing up in remote Ekuthuleni, there wasn't much to do after school, but I was one of the lucky ones. My father had made it out of his hometown and all the way to Big City where he worked for years before I was born. He never spoke about those days, but I knew something must have happened, not only because of his reticence to speak about it, but because when he left Big City he did not return to his home village but came and settled in Ekuthuleni, the most remote place on the Central Republic map. He worked in the Administration Office, though I do not know what he did there. All I know is that whatever he did often got him into trouble with his Yster superiors. He would always tell us, when he got drunk enough, how prosperous Ekuthuleni used to be thanks to the cattle farms and leather products. Meat products and leather goods became a thing of the past as Yster bureaucracy strangled farmers and artisans alike. According to my father, the Yster insistence on licensing everything was a ploy to create a dependency on the state. The final nail in the coffin of Ekuthuleni's fortunes was the disease that decimated the herds. Overnight, the wealth was gone. That is a story indeed, but it is not the story for me to tell.

My father drew a salary from the government and so we lived better than most, but we were not wealthy, not by anyone's standards. Despite that, Saturday and Sunday suppers were always, without fail, three-course meals in our home. My mother had worked for Yster officials before she married, so she knew about a lot of things that ordinary Wester people could never afford. She knew that the right way to start a meal was with a savoury delicacy, and even when she was reduced to serving tomato soup for starters because there was simply nothing else, she did her best to maintain her standards right until the end. Tomato soup was standard fare to start, followed by stuffed butternut, sweet potato and whatever other vegetables had been shipped in from Yster. Ekuthuleni had grain aplenty when the rains were good, and a few greens in yard gardens, but everything else was purchased from the Yster traders who ran the shops because only they had the licenses to do so.

With supper eaten and praises for my mother's cooking sung, my parents would bring out the brewed beer and the party would begin in earnest. By the time I was a teen the Yster shopkeepers had stopped importing canned and bottled drinks for Ekuthuleni. No one could afford them, but with grain easily available, making all sorts of beverages from the child-friendly umqombothi to the more lethal isigodokhaya was commonplace. It is one of my many regrets that I never learned how to brew the drinks of my people.

My mother had met this woman, a nurse at the only clinic, and somehow some sort of friendship was struck. The nurse was invited to one of my parents' parties and she brought along her two brothers, one of whom was the man from whom I got my first kiss. I think their last name was Mpofu; I never knew their first names or perhaps that is another detail that has fallen to my faulty memory.

I was seven years old then and somewhat precocious, and Monday loved to make me read paragraphs from *The Chronicle* to illustrate my cleverness. I won't lie, I loved that too. Sometimes my mother would call me in to refill the huge mugs of beer from the gallon-barrel that sat in the far corner, spigot dripping, which involved several trips back and forth across the room. She discouraged her guests from talking to me by always answering any questions on my behalf, but I didn't make it easy. I loved talking to the grown-ups. The room with the adults and their drinks and the laughter, or my room with the maid of the day? Of course I lingered.

One of the Mpofu brothers pulled me half onto his lap as I made to turn away after placing his re-filled mug in front of him. I tried to pull away from him and he laughed, saying he just wanted me to show him the bathroom. My mother watched, her smile frozen. When

her eye caught mine I tried harder to pull away, sensing I'd somehow displeased her. She got up then, saying to Mpofu that she'd show him the way, but my father interrupted, pulling her back down onto the settee next to him and giving her a kiss, loud, on the cheek.

"Let her show him," he said. "You sit next to me and love me."

I don't remember how I got outside but outside we were, which was odd because although our house had an inside toilet, here was this man, one hand fumbling with his fly, the other holding my skinny body tight against his leg while his piss hit the wall and flowed into the sand. I stood quietly, fascinated. Where was it coming from? When he finished he shook himself, picked up seven-year-old me, and kissed me full on the mouth. Hard. I remember his beard scratching my face as he tried to get his thick, wet tongue in my mouth. I ended up with his saliva coating the bottom half of my face. The smell of the fermented grain alcohol was revolting.

He mumbled against my face as he licked it, and I recoiled in extreme disgust but could not get away. He was like a madman, holding me up against the wall so tightly that I could only move my neck, and even then his head was in the way; my body was completely overwhelmed by his girth. I let myself go limp, tired, and he immediately set me down though he kept a hold of one arm. Now that my hands were free I wiped the slime off my face.

Leaning against the wall he mumbled, "Kiss it, kiss it," as he gently but firmly pushed me to my knees and pulled my head toward his groin. The mustiness rising from the darkness he was pulling my face into was strong and it made me retch. His grip on the back of my head loosened and I twisted away from him, stumbling to a stop a few steps away, in the pool of light from the still-open doorway. My mother was coming down the passage; she stopped in her tracks when she saw me, but only for a beat.

"What are you doing out there?"

Before I could answer the man mumbled, "Come here," from the shadows, and I turned away from my mother to look at him, taking an involuntary step away from him and toward her.

"Ulobani khonapho?"

I did not know his name so I could not answer my mother's question but I walked toward her, my heart in my throat. I wasn't quite sure what was happening but I knew I was in trouble, I could smell it. I could see it in the firm line of my mother's mouth and in her tight fists. We met on the doorstep just as the man stumbled out of the shadows, still fumbling with his fly.

"I was jush...just…pissing, couldn't find the toilet," he slurred, lurching past my mother and into the house, back to the party.

She turned to let him pass and watched as he held onto the wall, making his way towards the sitting-room. My heart was thumping. A few slow beats as if making up its mind, and then it was galloping crazily and I swayed, suddenly feeling dizzy. Mother picked me up, something she hadn't done in quite a while and, saying nothing, took me to my room calling for the maid to join us.

"Where were you looking when Sonto was going outside?" She was tucking me into bed as she spoke. I wanted to protest, go back to the party, ask her why she was putting me to bed when she had not done that since I was a toddler, but something in her movements and in the low voice I had never heard before made me keep silent.

"I was doing the dishes," the maid answered. "I didn't see her pass." I thought she stuttered but I couldn't be sure.

"Do you think the dishes are more important than my daughter?"

The next morning my mother took me to the Mpofus' home.

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They all lived together, the nurse and her two brothers, in a small house that sat in a huge, empty yard in Phelandaba, one of Ekuthuleni's neighbouring villages. Like Ekuthuleni, Phelandaba had once been prosperous. Tree-lined once-tarred streets were now dirt roads with occasional stretches of tar. The homes were larger than was common in Ekuthuleni; the few still inhabited were run-down and dilapidated. Time had not been kind to Wester but of course at age seven I knew nothing about any of that. The Mpofu home did not have a short hedge like ours did, just a wire fence strung between poles and a gate that hung open and crooked with an old, rusted "BASOPA INJA" sign tied onto it with a bit of wire. We ignored the sign and walked through the gate. MaMpofu, the nurse, sat with one of her brothers, not the slobbery one, under a big mango tree in one corner of the yard. Half a pawpaw lay cut side up on a flat Kango plate, the discarded peel and seeds of the other half were discarded on another plate. I remember how the black pawpaw seeds glistened in the sun.

MaMpofu greeted us warmly, moving over on her cansi to make room. We sat next to her, my mother folding her legs to one side and instructing me to "sit properly" when I imitated her, which meant lotus pose and taking care that my dress pooled modestly between my legs. MaMpofu's brother waited till we were settled, then got up to shake my mother's

hand and lightly rub my head as he returned to his seat. Small talk ensued. The weather, the rains, the latest news from Yster – I was already bored.

"We've been enjoying some pawpaw. Shall I?" MaMpofu spoke into the silence that had fallen once the pleasantries were over, gesturing at the fruit on its plate. She pulled the uneaten pawpaw towards her and cut it into two, before passing the plate and its contents to my mother.

My mother loved pawpaw and she nodded acceptance, deftly removing most of the tiny seeds from one slice before handing it to me. I took it in my hands and was about to bite into the orange flesh when my body seized at my mother's next words.

"Where is the other Mpofu?"

MaMpofu whispered something to her brother who responded by getting up off the rusted garden chair and headed into the house. I was picking missed seeds off my pawpaw slice when the two Mpofus walked out of the house, one carrying a stool that he placed next to his brother's chair before sitting. My hands and feet began to feel really cold, and the pawpaw swam before my eyes. Unlike his brother, the newcomer made no move to shake my mother's hand but he asked after her health, as manners demanded, and after my father. I sat frozen, pawpaw slice dripping orange onto my dress. I focused on the seeds. One, two, and three…and another one, four…

"Aren't you going to greet me?"

I knew he was talking to me. I thought I could feel everyone looking at me. I stared at the pawpaw slice in my hand. I could not move. Was this what rigor mortis felt like?

I heard him laugh. No one joined in. Nobody said anything. Perhaps they were all still staring at me, the grown folk. I don't know because my field of vision was filled with bright yellow-orange pawpaw, dotted with the little wet-looking black seeds that had escaped my mother's de-seeding.

"Don't you want to greet me?" he repeated. Pleading, almost.

I felt nauseous.

MaMpofu laughed then, a short chuckle. "She's just shy; she'll speak when she's ready."

I stared at the pawpaw slice in my hand. I turned it over. Yellow peel, tinged with green here and there. I turned it over again. Paw-paw flesh dotted with a few shiny black seeds.

My mother, coldly, "What did you do to her?"

Nobody spoke.

"Look at her. What did you do to her?"

"Me?"

The man laughed but not like you do when something is truly funny. It was nervous laughter, I know that now.

"She's just shy."

My mother reached over, took the pawpaw slice out of my hand and placed it back on the plate.

"Well. We were just passing by and thought to greet you. We're leaving now." She stood as she spoke, motioning for me to do the same.

"Hawu, you haven't eaten your pawpaw, you didn't even come into the house!" MaMpofu was flustered, flapping around my mother as she helped me get my shoes back on.

I wasn't sure what had just happened but it seemed best to co-operate. I didn't cry out even when she pulled the straps of my sandals too tight – who knew what this strange, cold woman would do?

"Yes." My mother offered no excuse for what even I could see was an abrupt departure, merely agreeing with MaMpofu and walking me at double-speed toward the gate.

"We'll walk you to the road." MaMpofu was all but running next to my mother, hand outstretched as if to grab her arm.

"No, that's fine. You can see Sonto is upset. We'll just go."

I said nothing and kept on walking, if you could call it that since my feet barely touched the ground as my mother, face stern and sandaled feet kicking up dust, pulled me along. Those Phelandaba yards were huge, it felt like an eternity before we reached the gate.

We walked away from MaMpofu and her two brothers, neither of whom had said a word. Back through the crooked gate with its rusted sign, back to the road to climb into a rickety mtshova, back to Ekuthuleni, and back to our beautiful house where the Mpofus were never spoken of again, ever.

That was the last time my parents hosted a celebration of any kind, and I never ate pawpaw again.

Why did I tell you all that about my mother and the Mpofus and all of that?
My name is Sonto and I am a Wester woman loving an Yster man. If I am broken then Wester men broke me first. If I had not found the love of that Yster man I could not have done what I did, and I would not be here now telling you this story.

Chapter 8

Sonto

When the sun came up on the massacre of Ekuthuleni, hollow-eyed survivors listened to the only person who seemed worth listening to: Sanuse. The bodies were burned according to his instruction. Nobody mentioned the bizarre smell, like roasting meat. We should have buried them perhaps, but who would have dug the graves? There were no men, the boys who were not killed or maimed were too young to wield shovels, and the women and girls who had not been killed or too badly injured were in no state. Those who were able spent days carrying bodies to igceke and piling them one on top of another with bits of kindling and plastic trash to feed the flames – it was nightmarish.

The survivors who did not stay and rebuild from the bones of the village nursed the injured and then departed. Sanuse said I too had to leave right away, that my father, a former government worker, must have been the target somehow. It made little sense but what did in those days? When I questioned where I was to go, he told me to go east to the coast and to trust the Ancients. Why me? Because I was the only daughter of the only government worker, and my staying would continue to put everyone in danger.

I was numb. And angry. I had no other family in Ekuthuleni, no one to share my grief. I remember not wanting to cry, afraid that if I let down my defences, if I let my grief spill outward, the other villagers, carrying their own grief as they were, would let me drown in it.

Some of the survivors would go to family in other villages like Sinyoka, like Phelandaba. Others made plans to travel closer to Big City. It was a long journey across the country and there was no fuel for the vehicles – there hadn't been in years, but what options were there?

Sanuse said that I had to go to the temple, he called it eNjelele, its true name. Again I asked – Why? This time he did not mention my parents. He said – Because of the snake. What could I say to that?

The funeral pyres had been burning for what felt like a score of days. It seemed everyone had developed a chesty cough and I was beginning to think the air would never be clear again when Sanuse approached me where I sat alone, trying to keep my eyes from fixating on the spot where I knew Monday and Mother's bodies had been placed. There was a burning in my chest, a sharp ache that never eased.

"You must leave soon," Sanuse said. His voice was raspy; all our voices were because of the smoke.

I glanced away when I saw him turn his head after a fit of coughing racked his body, knowing he was going to spit. I heard the phlegm splatter on the ground and forced myself not to retch.

"Why, why must I leave?" I had asked this before and until I got an answer that made sense to me, I would continue to ask.

"Do you remember the first time your parents brought you to me?" he asked, turning his yellow eyes on me.

I still could not meet his eyes. The ache in my chest had intensified and the nausea that had arisen when he spat on the ground had intensified. I began to worry that I really would vomit, but I wanted to hear more from the yellow-skinned healer.

Swallowing hard, I said, "Yes, yes I do. It was very long ago."

"Not so long ago that I don't remember," he responded.

The oily smile he gave forced me to turn away. From this distance I could not see what now lay where Monday and Mother's bodies had been. The ache in my chest became a pulsing pain. I felt like wailing, shouting my pain to the skies but I held it in. I would not give in to useless grief.

What was the use of crying since that would not turn back time? I had heard the villagers mutter about crying the grief out but I thought that was an excuse to lose control over one's emotions, to behave as the Yster were said to do at funerals, throwing themselves on the ground, screaming their grief for everyone to witness. Monday had always said it was a ludicrous performance that had nothing to do with grief and everything to do with playing on people's sympathies.

The villagers had taken to gathering on the outskirts of igceke every evening, reminiscing about the ones they had lost, breaking into mourning songs every so often. I understand the comfort they found in each other but I did not join them, preferring instead to spend my evenings – after the day's work of preparing communal meals as we now did – alone in my parents' house. The blood-stained carpet had been removed and burned but I could still see the stain on the concrete and I sat there for hours at a time, thinking.

Why? Why did the Yster have to do this? What sort of world did we live in where things like this could happen and people were expected to just…move on? Was this why my

father had left government service, because he could not stomach working with these monsters?

Over and over my thoughts would run in the same groove until I fell asleep, only to wake the next day to the pall of smoke that covered the village and the crushing tightness in my chest. Sanuse was speaking again and I turned my attention back to him.

"That appearance – no, that is not the right word - that *vision* that you saw – for it was a vision you know, one the Ancients wanted you to have – is why you must leave. You are not safe here."

"Surely the worst has come?" I protested. "What could be worse than this?" I gestured angrily at the burning bodies. "What more can be done to us?"

"If you were the target – because of the snake – then your enemies will know you live and they will return. You know Big City does not tolerate practice of the occult, and that is what they must have understood about you. If the former government worker – your father – was the target, then his enemies will seek to eliminate the risk of vengeance by getting rid of you too. Leaving is your only guarantee of safety, and the sooner the better. We do not know how far away the soldiers went or if they will return."

I had said nothing then, trying to make sense of what I was hearing. I could not deny that I had received a vision from the Ancients, nor that Monday had been heard to make anti-government proclamations. Besides, what was there to stay for? The exhausted runner who had brought news of the massacres flashed through my mind. If the Yster soldiers were truly in search of everyone opposed to Big City, then the daughter of a disillusioned Wester bureaucrat who was also known to have some experience of the occult would no doubt be on the list of those wanted. Sanuse was right.

"You must stop in Sinyoka for directions," Sanuse continued. "Beyond that, nobody knows how to get to the Temple of the East."

"But the temple was destroyed, was it not? What am I supposed to go there for?"

"Trust your instincts, child. And trust me."

Did I have any choice?

The Mkhomo tree stood for generations as the eastern boundary of Ekuthuleni. Going past it one entered the wider world. Go due east Sanuse said, reach Sinyoka, and from there cross the Fields of Stone, go over the mountains and on the other side, on the coast, you will find the Temple of the East, eNjelele. That is where the chosen of the Ancients find answers."

I had made the trek to Sinyoke with a group of villagers who, like me, were also now refugees. I told no one of the plan Sanuse had given me, they knew only that I was seeking a new home, just as they were. We trudged through the wilderness together, sharing what supplies we carried.

The little hamlet of Sinyoka stands alone in the middle of nowhere, on the way to nowhere. They say it was once a bustling settlement, the last one if you cross the wilderness eastward toward the coast but before reaching the mountain. They say that the Temple of the East used to send students there to practise their craft among the residents, and that everyone from Yster and Wester passed through Sinyoka for supplies before continuing eastward to the temple.

Now Sinyoka is only a shadow of its former self. The Temple of the East was destroyed in the Norther War and it is said that nothing remains where it used to be except the ghosts of priests, priestesses and their acolytes. They say that, but they also say that the temple was moved to another site faraway, and that the ghost stories are just that – stories.

I look back, knowing what I know now, and I wonder if it was foolish of me to listen to Sanuse. What would have happened if I had stayed, or if I'd tried to find a new home with the other survivors? Would there be a story to tell? Would there even be anyone who cared enough to ask for it, and to listen when it is told?

Past the Mkhomo tree was free country, no man's land, unowned and unclaimed. The rains had been good the previous season and now it was late in high summer; the land was heavy with wild bounty. In the early evening of that first day we crested a rise and there was Sinyoka below. I knew from Geography and History lessons way back in my school days that the village had seen a significant decline in population, but I did not expect the air of abandonment that hung over the little hamlet. Ekuthuleni had been marginalized by the capital, by The President, but at least we still had schools and a few shops, remote though we were. Sinyoka had nothing; it was barely populated. The few survivors of the attack on Ekuthuleni exclaim in disbelief as we pass through Sinyoka's gates. Their grief-stricken faces hold only tears and despair, their hands clutch at all the belongings they have brought with them.

I did not know what to expect when I entered the little hamlet, and I certainly did not expect that I would get a vision as I did. You could tell the town had been prosperous. The streets were wide and well-paved, the buildings well-built and still standing after years and

years of weathering and very few repairs. Even the abandoned dwellings looked serviceable, like all it would take is a few licks of paint and straightening of hinges to make them habitable. Thinking back, perhaps I should have been wary of and alert to danger, but I wasn't. There's something to be said for growing up safe: you never learn fear. I should have learned fear the night my parents died, but all I learned was hate for the Yster.

That first night I snuck away from the other villagers. They had come here because they thought to find family, or friends, I came here because this was the only place I could come. I decided to spend that first night outside the village, something inside me recoiling at the thought of following my travelling companions as they found family, the idea of accepting the expressed condolences of strangers and then begging for a place to sleep made me uncomfortable. I knew that if I asked, the women and girls I'd travelled with would include me in their plans, but I didn't want to ask and no one noticed when I began hanging back and eventually turned and made my way to the outskirts of the village.

It would be better to enter a new place in the morning anyway, with a whole day to find somewhere to stay. The sun was beginning to go down as I made my camp beneath a short ameva tree. My sleeping bag was worked-in leather, several layers sewn together to make a thick but pliable bottom layer with a thinner layer over it. The outer layer had been treated so that it was waterproof so long as no water got on the inside. Being an ameva tree, there were thorns all around and I worried that the sleeping bag would be damaged. Perhaps an ameva tree was not the best sort of shelter but this was the savannah and my options were limited.

Do you know the savannah? Wide open space under a huge blue bowl of a sky and umbrella thorn trees, ameva. Basically, thorns define the savannah. Even some of the grasses are thorny. You'll have to find out for yourself if that's really true but the point is that my options were limited that night. It was either under a thorn tree or open air.

The hides that made up the sleeping bag were cleverly attached to make a satchel during the day and a snug sleeping bag at night. It was annoying to pack and unpack the satchel every morning and evening to sleep in it, but that was better than carrying several bundles across the plains. It's not like I had much to carry, merely a few changes of clothing, some food, and a water bottle. There was some soap and a towel somewhere in there, maybe even a toothbrush, I cannot pretend to remember all the details of my ablutions. Every night of that journey my clothes would go into one bundle to form a pillow, and everything else –

the afro comb I carried even though I didn't use it, and the towel and so on – went underneath my head to serve as a makeshift pillow.

I slept under a tree and thankfully nothing pricked me now, except a worry that my sleeping bag was damaged. In the morning I had a quick meal of umhwabha and the bread that I'd left home with, peeled and wolfed down an orange and took a few swigs of water to wash it all down. My water bottle was still half-full and when I'd taken a few more gulps I broke camp, such as it was.

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Outside Sinyoka's walls was bare earth with a few patches of maize here and there. As I approached the village gate that morning, I had a vision.

I saw little boys and girls kicking a ball back and forth. I saw the boulders that marked the goal posts, and the deep gouges in the red earth where a stick had been used to draw and re-draw the boundaries of the playing field – sides and centre line only. I saw little boys, their brown feet covered in dust, sweat beading on their scalps and dripping off faces. An assortment of ripped shorts and once brightly-coloured t-shirts on little bodies that dribbled and tackled; legs and arms everywhere; sharp unbroken voices raised in glee as the game progressed. The vision lasted only a moment but in that moment I remembered Ekuthuleni as it once was, how happy we all once were, and I felt bile rise in my throat at the thought of all the Ysters had taken from us.

Chapter 9

Sonto

Everyone has a locked chest deep inside the darkest crevice of their heart where no light ever enters. Nobody else ever has the key to that chest; it's where we are truly alone. In that secret place where I am Sonto with all my darkness – and believe me, the dark places in me are very dark – I hate the Yster with a shameful passion. Shame because for all my strength in magic, I cannot channel that hate to anything else for any useful length of time. Shame that this unspeakable depth of emotion cannot be transmuted to something else or power some other pursuit. Shame that I, so well-loved, should hate so hard.

***

When I arrived in Sinyoka that first morning I headed for the best-looking place, the local inn. Well, I say *inn*. The building was barely standing but it was in better condition than others around it. For one thing, it had a solid door rather than broken bits of plank strung across a doorway as so many other buildings boasted. Rickety, but a door nonetheless.

Everyone was so despondent in that place that nobody looked up as I walked in. Not that there were many people: a few old men hunched over a game that looked like draughts in one dark corner, and the man behind what I supposed to be the bar, which was really just two crates placed one atop the other, serving as a counter.

I expected questions and I had prepared a story about where I was going and why. I planned to tell the truth. I was going eNjelele because the healer in my village said I had to, who was going to argue with that? I came from Ekuthuleni and I had left the village reeling from – something that happened, something that Yster did. I did not know how much detail I would need to give but there was no point in deception. Where else could I have come from on foot but Ekuthuleni?

And then there it was, dark memory rising. The smell of blood filled my nostrils, suddenly thick and cloying. The screams of men, women and children in peril. The ringing in my ears. The guttural voices.

Cockroaches. Snakes.

My mother screaming for my father. Monday dead. Oh Ancients, Monday dead. Blood gurgling from his throat. My mother, a bayonet in a belly, her dress hiked up over her thighs. Blood. Blood everywhere, on everything.

I forced myself back to the present, heaving. I swallowed the nausea that rose to find that the man behind the crates-cum-bar did not care who I was or what I wanted, all he cared about was whether I could pay. When he said he would give me a place to sleep, and food, I thanked the instinct that had me take all the money I had found in my parent's house. Later I wondered what he would do with the notes I gave him. Where would he spend the money? Or maybe he too was saving up for a fresh start in Yster somewhere, where they still had shops and goods on the shelves. I tried to question him about guides and the ease of finding one to take me to the temple but he ignored me, not even acknowledging that I had spoken, counting out my change slowly and carefully as if the coins and notes would escape if he didn't give them his full attention. He was a man of few words, most of them inaudible.

His wife was a thin, pinched-looking woman and she appeared when he shouted, walking quickly from somewhere at the back. He introduced me to her with no words to spare, and after a flash of teeth and a brief exchange of greetings she took me through the back of the inn-slash-pub, giving me a quick tour as we went. There, the kitchen. It looked deserted, and I wondered what kind of food was served here. I would find out soon enough, I had paid for a week's room and board after all. All my meals would be provided, and the owner had agreed to throw in provisions for the walk to the coast, to Njelele, if I found a guide. I was very proud of myself for thinking of that.

To get to the residence you opened a door set in the pub's back wall and instead of a storeroom as I expected, you walked right into the family living-room, the family being the dour man and his pinched wife. Curling pictures in weathered frames hung on the walls, the glass long gone from repeated falls off now-loose nails. There had been children here once, two little boys with wide eyes and peppercorn hair. The little boys became young men with serious faces, and then the pictures stopped. Had the boys died? Had they decided memories of home were too painful? Had they been swallowed by Yster like so many others? All over Wester there were little towns-turned-villages like Sinyoka and Ekuthuleni, places that had once thrived but were now ghosts of what they'd been.

In the living-room – I don't know what else to call it – were sofas. Sofas that looked like they would collapse if you tried to sit, if the springs sticking out at the oddest angles didn't puncture you first. There were rickety chairs. A table. A wood stove that looked like it had not been fired in a while. There was an open door in the wall on the left and through the open doorway I could see a lumpy-looking pallet bed and a lopsided wardrobe. The thin woman opened a second door and gestured me in, standing in the doorway behind me as I

took in the room. There wasn't much to see. Another low pallet bed with a thin, lumpy mattress covered in a raggedy-looking blanket. Looking at it, I was very glad I had my sleeping bag. A dresser that looked like it would tumble down if you looked at it wrong.

"You can sleep here. Toilet is outside. Meals in the dining room." Yster. I could tell by her accent. But the man was Wester I knew. So, inter-marrying was a thing in this place. That surprised me. I swallowed a grimace and nodded my understanding.

The woman turned to leave and I grabbed her sleeve. She stopped but did not look at me.

"I want to go eNjelele. Can you recommend a guide?"

"Someone will come to you. The guides choose. You don't choose." She looked down at the floor and jerked one shoulder upward. "Is like that. You don't choose. They choose."

"What?" I towered over her and she shrunk back, startled. What she was saying made no sense.

"You stay here. You eat, you sleep. Pay. Someone come. Tell you about Inzhelele and if you agree on price, they take you, bring you back."

Her accent grated. I felt each word land like a jagged edge cutting my sanity to pieces. Goosebumps appeared on my arms. I felt a cool breeze sweep over my body but it was just the cooling of the sweat that suddenly streamed down my back and from my armpits. My heart began a louder thumping. Bitter bile rose in the back of my throat. Instinctively I swallowed and immediately regretted it because it made the nausea worse. With sheer effort of will I bit back the darkness that threatened to overwhelm.

It was still less than a week since the Yster did what they did, and here I was, forced to make nice with one of their women. I closed my eyes, willing control to stop myself from shaking her.

When I opened my eyes she was still standing by me, but now she was huddled against the wall as if afraid that I would strike her. My scalp was tingling and that's when I noticed that her eyes weren't meeting mine. She was focused on my hair.

When Sanuse had questioned me about that night I told him the truth. The soldiers came in, stabbed my father, raped my mother and then killed her, and then I passed out so I don't know what happened after that. No, they did not touch me, except for making me stay put, they ignored me completely. Did I scream? I don't remember. He questioned me again and again as if he knew that I was leaving something out. How could I tell him that I felt my scalp tingling before I passed out, or that the soldiers had jeered at me over my parents'

cooling bodies and the reek of their blood, calling me a Wester witch? How could I tell him all that when I didn't understand any of it, when it didn't make sense that they had left me alone and unharmed? How could I tell him when I came to my hair was unbraided, and that since then I had not woken up with the same hairstyle I went to sleep with? It sounded crazy even to me, and I was living it. So I did not tell him, and I thanked whoever watched over me that my hair kept its new-found vigour confined to my sleep time…until I reached Sinyoka.

The woman's eyes were wide, fixated on my hair. Her hands were in constant play, twisting and rubbing over each other as if she were washing her hands without water. It was the first time that I'd seen someone actually wringing their hands. She looked frightened but she was still standing, making no attempt to run. When I realised that, I felt my heart slow into a more regular beat, and then I could feel my hair swirling about my head. That is to say, I could feel the tugging criss-cross my scalp even though I could not of course see what was happening to my hair. The sensation was strange but pleasant, and it carried an undercurrent of something else, something more primal.

We were still standing in the doorway of the room I had been given. I stepped back into the corridor, and as she moved away I pulled the door closed. I was not given a key nor did I ask for one.

"Follow me." I flung the words over my shoulder and strode towards the door leading outside for all the world as if I was the proprietor and she was the guest. We were in the courtyard at the back of the property and there was no one else around. The toilet stood in one corner of the yard, leaning heavily against the back wall. I could smell it from where I stood. I sighed. I would miss Ekuthuleni, I knew.

"Do you have something to tell me?" I stood facing her and she stood examining the ground. Mute, she shook her head.

She knew something, and she would not tell me. I felt the certainty settle over me, cloaking me in that peace that comes from knowing not how things are going to happen but that ultimately they will work for your good. I felt the weight I'd been carrying since Sanuse first spoke to me about the temple melt and dissolve under the bright Sinyoka sun. I could imagine it wafting away in wisps of grey and white, tendrils of fear and anxiety unfolding and melting as I drank in the sun. I felt my hair twisting around itself again. It was a weird feeling but it did not make me uneasy. I knew then that I was where I was meant to be and that everything was as it should be. The woman knew something, she would not tell me, and

there would be no point to my begging and pleading. That conviction settled in my stomach and I walked away from her without another word.

Calling Sinyoka a town was over-stating it. It *used* to be a town but now it simply did not have the population. Most of the adults, who couldn't have numbered more than fifty even with the Ekuthuleni refugees, spent their time in the run-down bar-like place where I was staying. A few women sat in doorways all day and talked about whatever women in ghost towns talk about, and a few children played in the streets. By the end of my first day I knew that those who were still here remained only to get what they could out of visitors who came through heading to Njelele, and there hadn't been that many of late.

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I loved to fall asleep in the courtyard in the afternoons. I would spread my sleeping bag along the back wall, pillow my head on my arms and drift off, baking in the sun. By the second day the smell of the latrine in its far corner didn't bother me so much – really, it wasn't so bad. It was scrubbed every morning with ash and soil, so, for what it was, I suppose the smell was what it had to be. It was hot during the day but I felt no urgency to do anything else. Indoors it would be baking hot. At least outside there was a chance of a breeze and besides, I loved the sun. The food served was simple home-grown and home-cooked fare. There were no convenience foods. Nothing that came out of a packet. No sugar at all (it was far too expensive to buy from Yster) and salt was used sparingly. The vegetables were fresh if not plentiful, and I was content. As the sun went down beyond Sinyoka's western wall I went inside for my evening meal, and once done eating, I completed my ablutions at the outside sink. I headed into my room hoping for dreamless, uninterrupted sleep.

On my second night in Sinyoka I came awake in the darkness, gasping for breath. The room was freezing cold as if someone had pressed a "refrigerate" switch while I slept. Terror sat like a weight on my chest, pressing me hard into the pallet bed and the thin mattress, choking the air out of my throat, making it impossible to scream.

You are alone

This thought grew in my head and I clawed at my throat, trying to call for the landlord and his wife to come but I never got the sound out. Nobody came. I really was alone.

As suddenly as it had begun the pressure that had kept my body from moving began to dissipate and I could breathe again. The room warmed up. My eyes swept around the little room even though I knew I would see nothing.

In the bright morning sunshine, the terror of the night was a hazy memory. I forced myself to believe that there was nothing beyond the natural, that the terror and the extreme cold were nothing more than products of an awakened imagination and vivid dreaming, perhaps the effects of being in a new place after everything that had happened.

Chapter 10

Sonto

"The woman. The old one. She wants you."

I guess greetings were not a thing in Sinyoka, no good morning, just straight to the point. It was early in the morning on my third day in Sinyoka. and the proprietor's wife had stepped up to me as I finished my breakfast of a hunk of coarse-ground grain bread and sugarless tea. The bread was lovely if plain, and I was enjoying my simple meal. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"What old woman?" I was impatient. "What are you talking about?"

The tiny woman drew herself up and smiled, managed to look even more pinched, no pleasure radiated from her smile. It was a smile that said she knew more than she was telling.

It's strange to think of how everything seemed to fall in place but that's how it happened. Sometimes I ask myself why it is that I was not afraid in those days and the only answer I can give is, I did not know what it was to fear. I did not know that there was anything to fear. I had lived in Ekuthuleni all my life and until the thing that happened, violence lived only on TV – that is, when we had the electricity to run the TVs.

I knew curiosity. I knew wonder. I knew anger. I knew love. I did not know fear until the night of that thing that happened. After that I knew to fear soldiers and rifles and bayonets; I knew to fear Yster men.

The inn master's wife, Shami was her name, walked me to a house at the end of the street, telling me in her broken Wester that Nona, Sinyoka's Sanuse, wanted to see me. After guiding me there, Shami turned back to the inn, leaving me alone. What was there to fear or to lose?

I knocked on the door to the house that stood at the end of the street. Like all the other buildings, it was run-down, almost derelict, but still standing. This house was also spotlessly clean if the stoep was anything to go by. I heard footsteps shuffling towards the door and prepared myself to meet Nona. I was looking forward to it. Maybe she would explain things. Maybe she would tell me about my hair; surely being a healer herself she would know? I was excited, eager. It did not occur to me to be wary.

A small, wizened woman with thick white hair and golden skin opened the door. Her face held no kindness or warmth and the smile I'd been holding slid slowly off my face when it was not met with one of her own.

"Sonto. Finally. Come in."

Finally? I followed the woman into a dark room and when she gestured, I sat on a wooden chair that stood next to a table laden with small piles of dried plants. Two of the piles I recognized. There was salvia for cleansing bad spirits. My mother burnt it every season change. I hated it because it made me feel light-headed. There was a bunch of withered marigold which I knew was used to treat open sores. There were a few other bunches that looked familiar but I could not name them. I already knew this woman was the village healer so the plants did not surprise me; that they were out in the open like this did. On a saucer at the other end of the table was more salvia, ready to be lit. I hoped she would wait until I left.

The old woman lowered herself into a chair and when I turned to her, she began speaking.

"My name is Nona and I'm the healer here. There is much I must tell you and I fear we do not have much time. The Yeoman grows stronger and with Wisest gone you really must go to Njelele. Immediately."

"Why? What must happen there?" I braved the lack of niceties. Clearly a Sinyoka thing.

The old woman sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Truthfully Sonto, I don't know. I never had to go. Why do you think this place is called Sinyoka?"

That was an abrupt change in conversational direction, I thought. I was still reeling as she went on.

"This is the Place of Snakes. Nobody born here ever had to go anywhere, our own oracles are right here in the caves."

I recalled that the village was built at the foot of a mountain. That must be where the caves where – in the mountain. And did she say snakes? I tried to picture a cave – Ekuthuleni had none. I tried to imagine walking into one and finding a tangle of snakes within. Almost immediately my neck tightened and my shoulders began to roll back and forth in a vaguely sinuous movement. I had no idea what was happening or why and I realized that I didn't care that Nona was watching. The movements felt good, like a morning stretch. My muscles contracted and lengthened in ways they never had before and with each roll of shoulders and neck, goosebumps went up and down my body, a series of both hot and cold shivers running through me. It felt very, very good.

After a few minutes the movements slowed down and eventually stopped. I was relieved because I was beginning to feel tired but very relaxed, very much at peace, and I had a sudden urge to sit in the sun.

Nona was still watching me, her eyes no longer wide. I raised an eyebrow at her. I had no idea what had just happened but I wasn't going to let on.

"Well?" I asked, one eyebrow high. I knew I had crossed the line into insolence. It occurred to me that this might not be a good idea.

Nona looked at me, considering, and then to my relief she shrugged and settled back into her own chair. "I don't know why you have to go to Njelele except that you must. It has been many long years since anyone went there, the temple might not even be standing. The guide does not speak of it. All I know is that you must go."

There was something I couldn't identify in the look she gave me.

"Ras is the last of the guides. He's originally from Yster you know, but he's lived here since he was a child." A knowing smile. "I think you'll like him."

I should have questioned her then, but I didn't. Instead I found my gaze drawn to a shadow that pooled in one dark corner of the otherwise bare room. It had not been there before. As I watched, the shadow resolved itself into a huge serpent. It was a deep, glossy brown with white stripes along its sides and down its face. The simple markings were striking and instantly recognizable. Umhlwazi. One of the most important (and beautiful) messengers of the Wester pantheon.

I felt no fear, only awe. The snake coiled and uncoiled, slowly, never moving closer to us, looping and twisting around itself with complete disregard for our presence. Nona and I said nothing, we simply watched, wide-eyed and barely daring to breathe as the snake writhed in a mesmerizing display of power and elegance. The silence grew until, still twisting and twirling over itself, the snake melted back into the shadows and disappeared.

I turned to the old woman, blood singing in my ears. "Did you see that? That was umhlwazi, the biggest I've ever seen! It was so beautiful!" I knew my reaction was extreme but I seemed unable to help myself. I was flooded by a warm joy I could not explain. Unable to sit still any longer I leapt out of the chair and stood towering over Nona who remained in hers, smiling widely.

"That was wonderful!" I exclaimed again. "Do you think it will come back?"

Nona looked at me and now her smile was reluctant. “Sonto. Do you know who that was? And what happened to you earlier, that thing you did, do you know that you were writhing exactly like a snake?”

“Who?” What did she mean, who? Surely she meant what? Messenger snake, right? That didn’t mean the snake was a who. As for her other question, I ignored it.

“That was –.” She stopped. “Do you know –?” She fell silent.

“Who?” I prompted. “Do I know who?”

“Sit down, my neck is starting to hurt, looking up at you like this. Sit.”

I sat.

“What do you know about the Ancients, Sonto?”

The question took me by surprise but so much strangeness had happened already that I took it in my stride. I was in a town that had lost so many of its people it barely qualified as a village; I’d discovered it was called the Place of Snakes; and a snake had indeed just appeared, put on a show, and disappeared. Talking about the Ancients did seem called for.

I nodded encouragingly at Nona. “Tell me what I need to know. Please.” I was impatient to reach my destination now, wherever it was. Seeing the snake had filled me with a sense of urgency I didn’t need explained. For the people of Wester the Ancients present themselves in the form of snakes. That’s why my parents took me to Sanuse when the snake appeared that first time. They knew it was something to do with magic and power, just like I knew the appearance of umhlwazi now was significant. “Tell me what it means.”

“That was Wundlu, the Prince of Light. It is He who leads those whom we call the Ancients as they lead us to the will of Ma.”

Ma, the Greatest Greatest One, the Creator of the world as we know it. In Wester creationism She is the Mother of all that is. It is her birthwaters that bring life.

“Are you saying that Wundlu –?”

“Yes, that was Him. Do you know what that means?”

Her eagerness was well-hidden but I sensed it and let her satisfy it. I had never heard of Wundlu. “Tell me.”

Nona’s face broke into a huge smile. “Wundlu appears only to the chosen – I’ve seen him several times myself – and His appearance always means one thing.” She looked at me, her face shining with excitement. “It means: wait.”

“Wait?”

"Yes, wait." She sounded very satisfied with herself, whereas I was experiencing acute disappointment.

"Wait?" I asked again. I hoped she would give me more.

"Yes. When Wundlu appears it means you must wait. Be still. As you are." I saw her lips form the words, I heard the words, but I still could not wrap my head around what she was saying.

"Wait?"

"Sonto. Snap out of it." She actually snapped her fingers in front of my face. "All it means is that you cannot leave here until…until something happens."

"Well I was going to leave when I found a guide so that hasn't changed, right?"

All the excitement at witnessing the materialization – The Prince of them all! – was fading. I did not want to hear that His beautiful display was about waiting some more. I would not wait. As soon as I found a guide or met this Ras person, whoever he was, I would be on my way, snake or no snake. Still, I wanted to hear what else the old woman had to say.

"You said you had something to tell me?" I hoped the recent excitement had not put it out of her mind. Did she even remember that she had sent for me?

"Oh, yes. Well, get comfortable then." And with that, she launched into it.

"There is a story they tell in Ekuthuleni about the wind that sees. I'm sure you know it. They say everything is seen by that wind, even what is done in the darkest, most hidden places. They say that the wind was grieved on the night of – the night the soldiers came, but that instead of keeping its silence as usual, instead of doing that, they say, the wind went to the Ancients and wept before them. They say that the wind wept so bitterly for the people of Ekuthuleni and their kin in the rest of Wester that even the ocean stilled to listen. And the land? What do you think they say about the land?"

She leaned forward in her chair, eager for my answer. But what answer could I give her? Nothing she had just said meant anything to me.

Instead I asked, "What about the land?"

"They say the land spit them out." And then she sat back and folded her arms across her narrow chest as if to say her job here was done.

"Spit who out?" I was confused but I had accepted by then that with Nona, it was best to take things as they came. I trusted the instinct I'd had since arriving in Sinyoka, the one that told me that I was exactly where I needed to be. "Who is they?" I asked. "Who is the 'they' saying all this about the wind and the sea and the land?"

She looked at me in surprise. “Why, the Ancients of course. How do you think I knew you were coming? I told the inn-master and his wife to watch out for a Wester girl travelling alone. How do you think I knew about Sanuse and Wisest? Child. Nc, nc.”

She sucked her teeth and I almost smiled. It was such a Wester thing to do and I found it comforting in its familiarity. What she was saying made sense but – it didn’t.

“Sanuse had a water bowl,” I said thoughtfully. “Wisest too, according to the gossips, but apparently it disappeared when she died. The villagers searched after her death – I was a child of course – but it was never found.”

I paused, drawing breath. “Sanuse used to keep his on a table in the hallway, I saw it when I went there after…when I went to him to find out more about coming here. He’s the one who told me to come. Do you have one too? Is that how you knew I was coming?”

Nona swore, and I pulled myself out of my revelry to meet her angry gaze. Her features were twisted in her fury and I drew back a little, surprised.

“After everything – after everything, you speak of him with…with *envy*?”

I was taken aback and tried to defend myself. “No,” I said. “No, you don’t understand. I was just saying that Sanuse has a water bowl and –” But she was not having it.

“Did you believe the Yeoman’s lies about his power? Is that why you’re here? Are you working for him?” The laughter that followed was cold and humourless, a perfect match for the bitterness that curled her lips. “They have taken everything we ever had – our land, our wealth, our lives – even the secrets of our power. You were young of course, but do you even care that he killed Wisest?”

It took me a couple of moments to follow what she was saying, and when I did the shock on my face was plain.

Nona saw my confusion. “You didn’t know?”

There was a ringing in my ears. My hands were clammy. I could hear my own heart thudding. It sounded very far away. If Sanuse killed Wisest then that meant that the very person who sent me away from my home, whose advice I had taken – I heard a whooshing in my ears, and then everything went dark.

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The next thing I remember is trying not to lean too heavily on the old woman as she helped me up. I was embarrassed – who falls off a chair? – But I was also aware that something had happened in that moment, that I hadn’t just fallen. The world had tilted for a

moment before everything went dark. I noticed a haze in the air and recognised the scent of salvia. Nona must have lit it and now it was making me woozy.

"Child, you're much too heavy. If you don't straighten up this minute I will let you hit the floor. Trust me, you don't want to hit the floor a second time."

With groaning effort I took a deep breath, stood up straight, and immediately bent over, heaving. I put my hands on my knees, head spinning. I managed to make it onto the chair and then I rested my arms on the table and put my head down, trying to keep the nausea at bay. It would not do to let on that salvia did unpleasant things to me. Rather let her think I was dizzy from the fall. I did not raise my head when the woman started speaking, but I listened.

"Well then, that was unexpected. The salvia went to your head, didn't it?"

So much for hiding that from her.

"It's a sign of power, that. It means you can get into a trance easily you see. Most people are unbothered by it but you, you just keeled over like someone hit you on the head with a hammer. I suppose I owe you an apology."

When I said nothing she went on.

"I should have asked what you knew instead of going off like that. But this, this is excellent!" She clapped once or twice, smiling widely. I stared at her, understanding nothing.

"Now Ras can take you to Njelele, just like I saw. And I must make amends. The Ancients will not be pleased that I doubted, and with Wundlu appearing and everything...it's just that the water bowl could only have belonged to Wisest but, well, you couldn't have known that –"

That's when I interrupted her. None of what she said made any kind of sense, especially the part about Sanuse killing Wisest. I wanted to hear more about that and about the salvia, and about all the other things she said but there were far more pressing matters at hand. The Ras she spoke of was Yster, so how could the Ancients want me to travel with him? I was willing to employ him as a guide but the way she spoke made me realise that there was more to that story. There was so much I should have known, so much that no one had thought to tell me.

The fury came swift, white-hot, and blinding. It startled me and left me disoriented for a few moments. Deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the nose. One. Out through the mouth is a lie. Two. Keep breathing. Be calm. Three. Say nothing. Four. One more. Five. The fury passed.

Nona said, “That is good. You know how to breathe. Good girl. The Ysters are not like us, you see, so one’s guard must constantly be up. Yes, keep breathing. It is good that you are angry. I understand it, I do. Look at this place.” She threw her arms wide and looked around to indicate her hut and everything beyond it.

“It was thriving once. Farms, children playing in the fields – we were a town that worked but look at us now. This is what Big City has done to us. This is what the Yster have turned us into: a village of beggars begging from each other, and all we have is the food we can grow. There’s nothing to buy and nothing to sell. The young people leave and they never come back.”

The woman could talk, and talk she did. I could not get a word in edgewise and I stopped trying. She had to stop eventually and when she did I would ask her about – what was his name? Ras. Yes, Ras. The Yster man.

“See these herbs? That’s how people thank me now. With plants that I can’t even use. They think digging these up helps me but what healer uses plants she did not harvest herself? Tell me, what use is their thanks? And yet I must accept because what else can they give me, what else do they have?”

A pause.

I looked at her and she looked at me. The questions I thought I was going to ask her dried up under her gaze.

“I know what you’re thinking, Sonto. You’re worried about Ras, aren’t you? I shouldn’t have mentioned the part about his being Yster.” A sigh. Silence.

Still I said nothing. The salvia was no longer burning but I was still a little dizzy.

“Nobody is just one thing Sonto, and even an Yster may be a good person, although it is prudent not to assume that upon meeting one for the first time.”

She smiled at her own wit. I tried to return her smile because I understood the sentiment.

“I met Shami, the innmaster’s wife. Are there lots of them here? The man you speak of, is he here? I have so many questions –”

The vision of that night rose anew and this time I could not stop it. The iron tang of blood permeating the air. The bodies lying everywhere. The odours of burning hair and clothes and flesh. The voices. The tremors began again. I was shaking so hard I thought I would fall off the chair again.

When the sights and sounds had faded and I had caught my breath again, and when I was sure the smoke from the newly lit salvia wouldn't make me vomit, I lifted my eyes to the old woman and met her gaze, staring into her deep-set eyes. Flecks of gold glowed in their depths. I was in the presence of an old power and I recognised it without knowing how. I had not before, but now it was unmistakeable. This was not just any old healer fearful of losing her place in her community. This was power, real power.

I felt myself falling – no – I felt *her* falling into *me*. She was in my mind and in my body and there was nothing I could do to stand against the invasion. She did not touch me at all but my head – my entire body – was held immobile in the vice-like grip of her magic.

She took her time, face set in concentration, camaraderie gone. I felt no fear, only an overwhelming sense of the inevitable. I am still not sure of the mechanics of it all these many years later. She rifled through my memories and desires and fears methodically, with just enough attention paid to identify each find for what it was before returning it to its place and moving on.

My memories of my parents were picked up, examined and discarded, just like the few glimpses of Wisest that showed up. She was seeing into my mind, seeing things I didn't even know I carried.

All I could tell about the woman who held me in thrall was her immense age. She was older than even Wisest had been, and Wisest had been old-old. Her age was a shield about her, covering her so well that I had not noticed just how old she was or how strong her magic. I tried to do what she was doing to me even though the effort made me wince, but all I got was the sensation of falling into a deep bottomless pit of time. Terror gripped my heart but I forgot to be scared when the pain in my head became a tight band around my temples. I wanted to cry out with the agony of it but still she worked on, examining every memory I carried.

No. No screaming. I would not give her the satisfaction. I don't know why but it was important that I not let her break me. My stomach roiled as new pain flooded my entire body. She had come to my memories of Sanuse. I felt a bit of her attention shift from holding me prisoner and with the opportunity presented by that momentary lapse, I wrenched free. I don't know how I did it, but I could feel her surprise as I slipped out of her control. She covered it well, but I saw the truth before it fell off her face. She was surprised, and impressed.

"You carry a powerful magic indeed, child. I can see why the Yeoman was placed there. To stop Wisest teaching you. Still, Ancients' will be done. What must be must be."

She moved away from the table and deeper into the room to where there were two armchairs facing each other in a corner. She motioned me to follow and I did so, settling into one armchair while she took the other.

"What did you do to me?" Speaking hurt like I'd swallowed glass, and my vision was blurry at the edges.

"Here. Water." The coolness of the steel tumbler was comforting and instead of drinking, I held it against my temples, switching sides every few seconds. When my breathing was even and I felt I could drink without choking, I gulped the water down, welcoming the soothing coolness as the liquid flowed down my throat.

It didn't occur to me to be wary of poison until I had swallowed the very last sip.

***

I took in every detail of the room. I was back in the inn, lying on a bench in the dining room. The ceiling was black with soot and dust and Ancients-only-knew what else. The smell of old food and smoke permeated the air and filled my nostrils. I sat up. Rather, I tried to. I lay back down when the room swam crazily, a reliable indicator that I needed a few more minutes at least. I lay there staring at the ceiling from the height of a bench, pondering what my life had become. Ekuthuleni and the life I lived there would have been a distant dream if not for the solid ache that sat square in my chest like it had since the day of the thing that happened; pain I knew I'd carry with me for the rest of my life. I missed home.

Everything was still, as if the life had been sucked out of the room. I could hear someone, perhaps the inn-master or his wife, moving about in the back. Judging by the shafts of sunlight filtering through the slats of the broken shutters, it was mid-afternoon. I had missed lunch and in a couple of hours the few people who came here in the evenings – to be social, you understand – would start making their way in. Thick beer – grain was plentiful here if nothing else – would be served to those who had money to buy it or something to exchange for it. A thick grain porridge would accompany the beer for those who wanted to eat, like me. Except, I had no appetite. Thinking about eating brought back to mind the last thing I'd put in my mouth: the water Nona gave me. From there, the next question was obvious. How did I end up on this bench?

The memory was fuzzy at the edges but I remembered clearly the pain I'd felt as she played around in my head. The salvia! That's what had made me weak. I recalled the old woman saying something about strong magic having a strong reaction to burning salvia. How did she resist it, then? I remembered that I regained control of my mind, surprising her. I

remembered moving to the armchairs. The last thing I remembered was drinking the water she gave me.

Chapter 11

Sonto

The first time Ras and I got together was – well, let's just say after that there was no going back.

I woke up on the bench disoriented and convinced that Nona had poisoned me with the water. After a few minutes I was able to sit up and that's when I saw him. He was leaning against the open doorway, arms crossed across his broad chest. His name dropped into my mind as he stepped forward into the room, arm outstretched. We shook hands but I didn't get up.

"I'm Ras. You're going to Njelele, yes? We have to leave now."

No one in Sinyoka believed in small talk, that much was clear.

"What happened?" Judging by the sun, not much time had passed, it was still afternoon. And so this was the Ras? I waited for the wave of revulsion that always came at the mention or thought of Yster men, but it never came. I would think about that later. *What happened?*

I looked up at him, waiting for an explanation. The inn-master came in from the back and took up his place behind the crates that served as a counter. Ras turned to him and asked if he would arrange some food for us to take on our journey over the mountains to the coast. The man nodded and went away. He was gone for long minutes during which Ras explained, quickly.

According to him, Nona said she intended to put me to sleep in her home as a favour to me because I had been through a lot. The tasteless herbs that had been in the water were supposed to help me sleep but instead I was knocked out immediately. While I slept, Ras told me, she searched her water bowl and found something that meant that we had to leave for Njelele immediately, it was now a matter of urgency. So much for waiting, I thought. What about Wundlu's appearance then? But I said nothing and let him tell his tale.

Nona had straightaway sent children running to fetch Ras – he was in the village all along! – and convinced him of the need to get me eNjelele with haste. He had brought me back here and waited for me to come around. He was contemplating pouring water on my still-sleeping form, but before he could I came to.

I found it all a little bit strange but then so much had already happened that was just as strange if not more so. The appearance of Wundlu, for example. When I first asked Nona, she said it meant that I should wait but clearly her interpretation had changed. I had not argued with her explanation because – I don't know. I didn't yet trust myself. Not then.

I looked at Ras and I again felt that rightness, that sensation that told me that I was not mistaken, and I stood up. As I did, my hair uncoiled out of its goda-braids, I felt it flow down my shoulders and almost immediately it braided itself again. Ras had only time to step back in alarm before it was smooth again, the two goda firm on either side of my head and down my back. I gave it a pat, musing at how this had not happened with Nona. I still did not know what it signified.

I waited for the Yster man's reaction. A heartbeat. Then he burst out laughing. "I should have known," he said, still chuckling. "Of course you have magic."

I felt annoyed that he was not more surprised, that what was special to me was so commonplace to him that he could laugh it off.

"Alright. Give me a few minutes to collect my things," I said. I got up to fetch my satchel from my room. He put out a hand to stop me as I tried to walk past him.

"Your things are here." He took a step towards the bench and picked something off the floor. My satchel.

"Fancy," he said, examining it casually. "Good Wester work. Very old, by the look of the leather."

He was right. My satchel almost qualified as an antique. It had been in my family since Wester was a leather-worker's paradise, generations before I was born. Monday had hesitated to let me have it since I would be the first girl to carry it, but after the thing that happened he wasn't around to have a say in the matter. It was clear that the leather had been replaced in places as it wore out. But it was well-made and I was very proud of the history it represented. As I took it from Ras I noticed that he had packed it far better than I ever had. It was better balanced and not uncomfortably bulky. I was about to thank him when I noticed that he had a similar satchel, only slightly bigger.

"How did *you* get a Wester satchel?" My tone was uncharitable and I wasn't sorry. He was Yster, he had no business carrying a Wester satchel. "You're not Wester." I obviously have a talent for pointing out the obvious in times of distress.

He looked at me, his eyes narrowed. “You do know they were made for trade? Who do you think they were all sold to? Other Westers?” He raised an eyebrow. “These things are all over the place in Yster. They last forever.”

That was because they were made of excellent quality leather, I thought, slightly peeved.

“It’s our heritage, not yours.” I knew he was right about the trade bit, but still.

“It’s ours, too. Prisoners of war, remember? Before the Norther war that unified us against a common enemy? We herded your cattle. We became part of you and fought alongside you but after we had united and together defeated the invaders you turned your back on us. You started talking about lineage and heritage. West-blood only, everybody else was second-class and not worthy. I know the history, just like you.” His tone was calm and matter-of-fact.

I could not let his words stand. “So what?” I sneered. “So what? We won the war *together* but when the Northers left, you killed us. You annihilated us. Villages, towns, cities – all of it burned and for what? And the worst part? The worst part is that even now, so many years after that war, you’re *still* tormenting us. Because you want to be like the Northers and rule everything and everyone! Damn you greedy Ysters, and damn the Northers who armed you.” I took a breath and plunged on. “You’re right, you *were* part of us but in the Great Norther War you chose a side and it was the side of the Yster, not the united republic. It was all Yster pride and you massacred us!” I started off calm but by the end I was almost shouting. How dare he.

“No. We only protected ourselves from you. Had we not gone on the offensive you would have killed us. It was a war for leadership of this country. The point of war is to destroy your enemy.”

That is the point of war, he was right, but there should never have been a civil war to begin with.

“We were allies against the Northers. Afterwards, we could have gone our separate ways.” When he opened his mouth to speak I raised a hand, silencing him. “And you’re wrong. We Westers would never have done to you what you did to us.” I looked around pointedly. “What you *continue* to do to us.”

He tried to respond but I’d had enough. “Excuse me. This is not history. I am talking about the murder of my parents and the massacre of my community only a few days ago, by

your people." My anger was white-hot now. "Do not stand there and talk to me like you're reading from a textbook. *This is my life!*"

Our eyes met. His were unperturbed. We could have been discussing the weather for all the emotion he showed. I waited for the fury and venom to wash over me but nothing came, only the rage he'd triggered remained. Ras held my gaze for a couple of moments and just when I thought he was going to say something to break the silence, he turned away and strode towards the exit.

"If we leave now we can make it to the foot of the mountains by sunrise," he threw over his shoulder. "It shouldn't take longer than a couple of days to get to Njelele. Let's go." The last few words floated toward me as he stepped out into the afternoon sunlight, his satchel on his back. I grabbed my own satchel and followed him. And so my journey to Njelele began.

Chapter 12

Sonto

Sunset is my favourite time of day. Everything is at its prettiest then. We call it the time that beautifies, ilanga selibantu-bahle. What has been active all day is preparing for rest and the children of the night are waking. The cicadas come out and, unlike at sunrise, the birds are quiet. The sounds of the bush are beautiful no matter what time of day but the sounds I love best are those at twilight with the sun's rays are like the dying notes of a beautiful song telling the last secrets of the day. We left Sinyoka as late afternoon turned to twilight and night began to fall; I could not help but wonder what was coming next. Everything that had happened since I left home – since the night of the thing that happened – was so far beyond the realm of my experience that I couldn't even begin to try to imagine what was in my future.

Night had fallen when we got to an old-fashioned water pump. We had been walking for what felt to me like hours and I was ready to rest. Ras wanted us to walk through the night and make camp in the daytime to avoid walking in the heat. I wanted to see the terrain we walked through so I wanted to walk in the daytime, but that first night there was no time to argue. The urgency of my mission was clear, though the reason for it was not, so we left Sinyoka fully intending to walk through the night and get to the Fields of Stone in the morning. Everything changed when we got to the water pump, the skotsho that stood alone in the middle of nowhere.

It was one of those pumps with a very high spout and a long handle. For water to flow someone had to work the handle. This one was no longer in regular use. Sinyoka was poor but it did have piped water, one tap set in one corner of each yard to supply each household's needs. The skotsho filled me with excitement as soon as I saw it. For the three days that I was in Sinyoka I had not managed to figure out how to wash properly with only a bucket so I had resigned myself a lower level of cleanliness than I preferred. Now out here in the bush, where I would never have expected it, was an opportunity to wash my entire body. It was an outdoor shower for all that was primitive and unenclosed. The prospect filled me with a delight I cannot put into words.

All I had to do was convince Ras to pump for me and to keep his eyes averted. I didn't think it would be difficult. I simply told him I had to wash off Sinyoka's dust before I

went any further. I even went so far as to imply that as a magic woman it was imperative I do this as soon as possible. Would he argue? Of course.

"You can't expect to maintain your routines on the road," he said impatiently.

The moon was bright that night. All around us and stretching for miles was a sea of grass, waving in the breeze. Here and there were the dark umbrella shapes of ameva trees and rock outcrops. The skotsho stood in a circle cleared of grass by the feet of decades and beyond it loomed a huge tree, bigger than any tree I'd ever seen before, bigger even than Ekuthulenis uMkhomo tree. We had been arguing since we first sighted iskotsho and now that we were upon it, I was even more determined to get my shower.

Ras spoke at length about how it was unreasonable of me to want to stop so soon after leaving Sinyoka, about how we had to push on and rest in the daytime. I ignored him. My mind was made up. While he talked I began to get ready for my improvised shower.

"Njelele is about three days away, two if we walk like people who aren't half dead."

I ignored the reference to my complaints of fatigue just as I ignored his less-than-supportive attitude.

"Will you pump for me while I wash? You can keep your head turned." I waited, towel and soap in hand.

I honestly didn't care whether he peeked or not. What I mean is, if I had thought of the possibility I would not have cared. I suspect that I wanted him to, a little, just so that I could laugh at his audacity, but mostly I just wanted to wash off the dust and grime and be clean again. I convinced myself that once I was clean I would be able to think better, that the whole Sinyoka episode would make sense if I could only get clean. I simply followed through on what I wanted.

With ill-humour and in silence, Ras pumped and I washed myself. He told me later that my body gleamed and glistened beneath the moon that night; that my skin looked oiled and that I, wet-skinned in moonlight, was like something from another world, one more sensuous than this one. He has a weakness for water, Ras does. I learned early on that if we had a fight and he wasn't talking to me, announcing that I was going to take a bath or a shower was a sure-fire way to put sweet makeup lovemaking in motion, but l don't want to skip ahead so I'll say no more about that.

As I washed, I went over the events of the past few hours. Shami telling me to go to Nona. Nona and Wundlu and the salvia. Nona rifling through my memories like so many old notebooks. Nona telling me about Ras. Later, Ras insisting we leave immediately and my

own soul's testimony to that urgency. My thoughts turned to Sanuse and what might be happening in Ekuthuleni, but just as quickly, I turned them back. I was not ready to face anything to do with Sanuse.

By the time I finished my pump-shower I had regained my equanimity. I accepted that I had to go eNjelele; it seemed like I had nowhere else to go. The journey gave me purpose and direction – certainly, it was a more appealing option than returning to Ekuthuleni or wandering the countryside in search of a new home. Water cleanses more than just dust, you see. It can also bring clarity of purpose by washing away all the extraneous stuff and leaving only what is essential.

I realised one other thing. Since meeting Ras I had not slipped into visions and thoughts of Sanuse and Ekuthuleni did not hurt or cause my chest to burn. When I was with him what had become my new response to mention of Yster people was not triggered, at least not in the same way. There was, I had to admit, something about him.

I knew as I got dressed that Ras was watching me. He stood under the huge tree, buttress roots almost up to his knees, bright moonlight shining through the leaves and casting shadows upon his face. I knew he was watching me. I felt his gaze on me and warmed to it, inexplicably glad that I was clean and just as inexplicably convinced that he was enjoying the picture I presented. I unbraided my hair and ran my fingers through it, loosening a few of the tangles. I had chosen not to wash it because I did not want to sleep with wet hair, but I wondered when I would have the chance again. Perhaps I could convince Ras to let me wash again in the morning. About this, I was not at all confident. I couldn't do much with my hair except plait it back into the two goda on either side of my head but I eventually decided to leave it loose for a while.

I joined Ras in a nook created by the huge buttress roots and the trunk and silently prepared my sleeping bag, surreptitiously watching him unpack and prepare his. It was a lot bigger than mine and seemed newer, or perhaps it had been patched more recently. We ate from the supplies Shami's husband had prepared for us: more coarse bread and umhwabha from an animal that had been slaughtered who knew when. Who would have thought that one day I, Sonto, a nobody from Ekuthuleni would be on my way to Njelele, to the coast – I'd never seen the ocean before – with a man I did not know, who felt quite unlike a stranger?

Watching Ras watch me I was glad my hair was loose. Unbraided it was a thick afro and I knew not just from the way his eyes followed my every movement but also because of how *I felt*, that I made it look good. I know sunlight looks good on me, but I had never seen

pictures of myself in moonlight and let me tell you, when I did, the events of that night made perfect sense.

"Are you still hungry?" His voice was low and well-suited for the moonlit night surrounding us. Even an octave higher or lower would have been out of place.

I smiled, meeting his eyes and not blinking. He swallowed and looked away.

"I am, actually. But I don't feel like eating anymore. I feel too – I don't know. Too – … *something* to eat."

He smiled at me and I felt a warmth flood my body. Something crackled in the air like static but it was gone in a heartbeat, leaving goosebumps on my arms. I felt newly energised, alive. I looked around and upward into the leaves of the gigantic tree.

"This tree. Isn't it out of place? Only ameva grow here and once in a while you'll come across umkhomo. Do you know what this one is?"

Ras looked up at the leaves, which were an indistinct rustling mass in the darkness, revealing only glimpses of starry sky. He busied himself with his sleeping bag, smoothing the leather and rearranging whatever he had bundled to make a pillow. I was in a good mood all of a sudden. I decided to let him have the silence.

I sat on one of the buttress roots – huge things that were really quite comfortable for what they were – and prepared to do my hair. I lost myself in the process, gently running my fingers down each section of hair and feeling for tangles before twisting it, my thoughts flitting here and there and settling on nothing. I was working on the last section, the problematic section at the back of my head that always had the most tangles, when he finally answered me.

"This is a Khaya tree, Sonto. The Northers called it Southern Mahogany. Have you heard of it?" I had not.

I waited for him to say more but he remained silent and began rummaging in the pockets of his satchel-turned-sleeping bag.

I was about to open my mouth to speak when Ras stopped his rummaging and looked up at me from where he knelt.

"Did you feel that?" he asked, looking first at me and then sweeping a searching glance all around. Then he sat back on his haunches, looking at me.

"What's the matter? What is it?" I could hear an unfamiliar note in my voice. Panic perhaps, or fear.

"I – I don"t know," he said, still staring at me. "I thought I heard something but maybe I felt it…" His voice trailed off.

I wondered if he'd felt the same thing I had felt earlier, that crackle of energy, and then I dismissed the thought as foolish.

He got up and came to sit next to me, putting one hand on my shoulder. "I travel this way all the time, alright? Nothing is going to happen to you. There are no wild animals here and we'll be there before you know it."

His hand was warm and heavy on my shoulder. I could have tilted my head to look at him but instead I leaned into him, so that my head was under his chin and resting on his shoulder. He was forced to let his arm slide when I moved and for a minute we just sat there, his one arm around me. He began to stroke my back. Timidly at first and then when I did not protest, more firmly.

I wanted him to kiss me.

Lifting my head, I looked into his eyes and then brought my lips to his, my eyes closing when our lips made contact. His lips were full and warm beneath mine and they parted gently when I touched them with my tongue. His arm was still around me but his right hand now gently cupped my breast.

He lifted his head separating his lips from mine and I moaned, involuntarily. I was immediately ashamed of myself. I could not raise my head to look at him, I was that embarrassed. I'd thrown myself at him and now I'd have to hear him tell me how this was not right and –

He was kissing me again but this time it felt different. This was a kiss on his terms. It was thorough. So thorough and yet supremely gentle. There isn't an inch of my mouth that his tongue didn't explore that night. His energy was infectious and I responded eagerly, pressing my body harder against his, moaning against his mouth, my desire making me all kinds of stupid. When he slowly slid off the giant buttress root I slid right with him, unwilling to be separated from him for even the time it would have taken for us to make ourselves comfortable on the sleeping bags.

I remember thinking, thank the Ancients I'm done with my hair, but that's all I had time for before I was on my back and he was half on top of me kissing me like I was his oxygen, his hands alternately enfolding my braless breasts and flicking my nipples until my breathing was without rhythm and I was writhing on the sleeping bag eager, no, desperate for a harder touch. I kissed him back just as thirstily as he kissed me, pulling his head to mine

and holding it there as I writhed beneath him, trying to get him settled between my open thighs.

At some point, my hands worked themselves into his pants and I pulled him into me, the clothing we still wore presenting an unbearable barrier to what I wanted – what we both wanted to feel. I pulled him to me as if that would ease the ache that had flared up deep in my belly. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pressing my groin upward, gasping as he rubbed against me and, when he hesitated, pressing myself still harder against him, rocking back and forth until it was slick between my legs, wetter that night than I'd ever been before. I'll tell you now, having him rub against me there was so thrilling, so naughty, so electrifying – but it was also frustrating. I knew I would come if he kept it up and I didn't want that. The frustration lay in the desire to climax, in knowing that that desire could be fulfilled any second – I was that close – and not wanting to come like that, fully clothed and without the opportunity to feel him come too. No, that was not what I wanted. There would be other times when that would be enough, but on that first night I wanted to wait, to savour the feel of him. Even though I was half-delirious with desire and didn't know what I was doing and could not have given a coherent answer if asked, I knew I wanted him inside me. Right there in the open beneath that Khaya tree, I wanted that man I barely knew to slide into me and bring me to climax. Nothing else was acceptable.

The thin (and damp) material of my cotton shorts and the even thinner (and damper) cotton of my panties felt like nothing when he pressed his hardness against me. I was agitated, needing to feel his skin against mine. Pulling my hands from his back I pulled my t-shirt over my head, forcing a brief moment of separation which lasted too long for my liking and I hungrily pressed my lips against his once more, moaning when he brought his hands back to my breasts to knead and mould till my breath dragged in my throat. What came next is a blur now, but – the heat of him! Oh Ancients, the searing heat of him! I gasped, screamed, cried real tears when finally, finally, all clothing was discarded and he sheathed himself in my body. Real tears. He felt like coming home.

That first orgasm felt like all the cliches of romance novels. It felt like falling, like flying, like touching heaven. All the words that came to me later when I tried to explain it to him – words like ecstasy and bliss and rapture – none of them come close to what I felt when I came. I fell into heaven and could not find my way out for long, long minutes and when I did, I could not stop crying.

I remember that Ras breathed heavily for a long time, as if he'd run a sprint and was still trying to catch his breath. I wanted to ask him what he felt. I wanted to know but all I did was lie there, tears streaming down my face. I turned on my side and sobbed, into my hands. My heart was full to bursting point and I think if I had not been crying I would have died from actual physical happiness. Perhaps I was crying too for the fact that it took an Yster man to take me to the brink of death by pleasure.

Chapter 13

Sonto

Before I met Ras I saw him in my dreams. No, I worded that wrong. What I mean to say is, I knew Ras before I met him, and I knew him from my dreams. I felt his touch in my dreams both on my mind and on my body. Every now and then I would wake up sweating with the exertion it took to get my pleasure from the faceless man loving on me. I was seventeen, eighteen, and learning new things about my body when I would come awake with my hand between my legs, slick with desire and passion for a man I recognized only by his hair. And what hair he had. Ancients, what hair!

When I met Ras at Sinyoka, I did not immediately recognize him as the man from my dreams. I think sometimes that if he had worn his hair loose when I met him first I would have recognized him sooner. In those days he kept his hair plaited in a thick Nguni braid down the middle of his head, the ends of the braid hanging low between his shoulder blades. I'd always maintained that long hair on men was unattractive at best and feminine at worst, dreadlocked or not. There was nothing unattractive or feminine about Ras. As it was, he did not let his hair loose till after we lay together, panting, under the Khaya tree that stood outside Sinyoka.

I snuggled against him, my head resting in the curve of his shoulder. I breathed in his scent. Man-smell. Musk.

"Sonto."

His voice did things to me. There are no words to describe how it reached to the very centre of my being, compelling me to respond as femininity responds to masculinity.

"Baba. I'm listening."

"Your eyes. I watched you as you came. I know maybe the moonlight…maybe…" He stopped speaking and sighed. I watched him swallow once, and then twice. I said nothing.

"When you held onto me, pulled me into your – ever deeper – and – so tight – …" He groaned then, a sound that made my insides clench. I almost let out a moan of my own at the image he was creating. His Adam's apple bobbed and he was silent for a minute. I too stayed quiet but my thoughts raced.

"Your eyes changed, Sonto! You know that gold is the colour of magic, of power, do you not? Your eyes turned golden and I wanted to stop but I couldn't. You were so – it was so…"Again he trailed into silence.

As soon as he said gold, Sanuse popped into my thoughts. His fried-egg eyes. His yellow skin. I sat up, my eyes wide.

"Gold? Yellow? The colour of magic? What are you saying, Ras?"

"All power wielders change over time. It's so that people know who they're dealing with. Like your hair." He sat up, facing me. "And remember Nona, how golden her skin was? That's the magic." He took hold of my hands but fell silent.

I thought back and he was right. Nona's skin did have golden undertones, it was the first thing I noticed about her. Ras was speaking again.

"You will change too."

That must be why Sanuse began to turn yellow all those years ago. He ended up looking sickly though, jaundiced. Nothing like Nona's glowing radiance. Maybe the change worked differently in men.

I wanted to ask Ras about this but I hesitated. I was not ready to talk about Ekuthuleni and its mysteries. I was lost in my thoughts when I felt a light touch on my still-naked breast.

I watched, mute, as Ras flicked a nipple before cupping my breast in his hand. Instantly my body felt heavier, as if everything I was had coalesced and sunk to the centre of my body, heat spreading from my belly downwards and throbbing there.

"My power-wielder." He smiled lazily and although his use of the possessive both thrilled and confused me I smiled back as my body continued to throb.

He toyed with my breasts, alternating from one to the other sometimes bringing his mouth to a nipple and sucking on it, making me gasp. All the while, I listened to him talk.

"My people – our people – believe that the realm of the Ancients is so close to the sun that everything there is constantly bathed in golden light. Constantly. Nothing but golden glow all around, all the time." His voice took on a wistful note.

I tried to imagine such a place but couldn't. Ras did not pause in his ministrations and I did not wish to interrupt him.

"It sounds beautiful, doesn't it? Imagine it, Sonto."

Insistent now, calling my attention back to him. I'd been contemplating his people, who they were. I knew he was Yster but he knew more about Wester than he let on. The way he spoke about the history when we argued had shown me a man who was not as unaware of the origins of Yster-Wester tensions as so many Yster were. But if I asked him about Sanuse I would inevitably have to talk about the Yster battalion that killed my parents and destroyed

my home while he fondled my naked breasts. I was not ready to confront that I was in fact naked with an Yster man.

"You must be powerful Sonto and –" He fell silent yet again.

I lay down and put all thoughts about anything that was not immediate out of my mind. His hand trailed along my waist and the small of my back and what of my rump he could reach, gently stroking, then he lay next to me. We were wrapped in an easy silence, listening to each other breathe, looking up into the leaves above us.

"Did you know that the Khaya tree is said to be the tree of life?" His voice startled me out of the stupor I'd fallen into.

"What?"

His hand had stilled, nesting in the dip of my waist where it flared into my hip.

"Yes. You know khaya means home, right? They say if a man and a woman climax under it their union is blessed."

I giggled. Of course I knew what the word *khaya* meant. What I did not know was the myth and I was not sure what to do with this new information. My giggle was more out of nervousness than any kind of amusement.

"I'm Wester and *khaya* is a Wester word so of course I know what it means. I just never heard that particular, er, fact before." I spoke very little Yster and Ras's Wester was probably just as bad as my Yster. At least, that's what I thought.

"How do you know that?" I continued. "About the Khaya tree? Does the Yster name mean the same thing?"

In response he brought his face to mine and I forgot what I was going to say as heat bloomed where our lips met. I became aware that he was no longer interested in talking when I felt his hard length press against my belly as he leaned close to kiss me, more on top of me now than beside me.

Lips locked in a tantalizing catch-and-release dance. We moved and shifted until I sighed at the feel of him throbbing into me, sliding deep and then even deeper. As my body moulded to his, a new kind of throbbing began, intensifying each time he rocked in and then out again, as he thrust and withdrew, not varying speed or stroke length till I thought I must scream or faint. I want more – faster, harder, deeper.

My body moved of its own accord, my legs wrapping around him, urging him to meet my need and satisfy his own. He rested his elbows on either side of my head and with his face above mine and our eyes locked, he began to speak over me.

“Keep your eyes open.”

I was too far gone to respond, I only kept my eyes locked onto his. Up and down my hips rocked, pulling away from his only to come back together a heartbeat later, before separating again.

Sweeter and sweeter grew the music in my head to match that of my body. Between my legs, a different kind of music.

“Sonto. Sonto. Sonto.”

With each murmured intonation of my name, Ras thrust into me. With each inward thrust I lifted my hips to welcome him home. Biting my lower lip, still looking into his eyes with my hands clutching at his shoulders, I was determined not to beg him. With each thrust I felt myself coil tighter and tighter, my orgasm building in sync with the music in my head. I was too caught up in what I was feeling and hearing to do much more than ride the wave. His eyes burned into mine and I fell into his soul. It was as dedicated to the moment as his physical body.

“Ng’fun’uchame. I want to feel every spasm, Sonto, I want to –”

And then speech failed. He thrust faster and harder and I rose to meet him, matching him stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust.

“Ancients! – Sonto! How –?”

I heard the question in his voice though his passion obscured the words. “I –”

Ras groaned loudly and poured himself into me, clutching me to him. He raised his head and opened his mouth wide as if to roar at the sky before clenching his teeth a few seconds later, as if he couldn’t quite decide whether to let it out or hold it in – whatever he was feeling. I watched as his eyes rolled back into his skull. Then he went limp on top of me.

Moments of still silence passed, the sound of our laboured breathing mingling with the sounds of the world around us. The wind caressed the leaves of the Khaya tree far above and the grass all around. The rustling and whispering were the perfect accompaniment for my mood. I needed to swallow my disappointment.

I drew breath and tensed to ask him to move off me, to push him off, but he too moved and I gasped. Then I sighed and let my body soften, marvelling that he was still hard. My passion, which had begun to cool, rose once more and Ras was moving in me again, rocking gently in and out of my body.

He rode me gently and without urgency. I held my breath on the edge of orgasm, mouthing his name and calling the gods to bear witness – and then I was limp, only receiving as he thrust into me, pushing me over the edge.

I sighed. Oh! As my body shuddered and clenched around his, mere seconds before he began to spasm in turn, spilling more of his seed into me. We held onto each other as ecstasy swept us away.

"Sonto. Khaya lami. Sonto. Khaya lami." Over and over until his body stopped jerking he called my name, named me his home. Over and over as we came and came, over and over he twinned our destinies and entwined our futures while high above us the moon shone, dappling my skin and his with the shadows cast by the Khaya leaves.

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I awoke with a start. The morning was all blues and purples, and in the east hints of pink and orange streaked the horizon where it met the mountains. The sun would be up soon. I sat up and looked for Ras. He was sitting on one of the gigantic buttress roots watching me, his chin cradled in one hand, elbow resting on his knee. That's when I noticed his hair and scrambled backwards, suddenly afraid. *How could this be?*

Ras saw the alarm on my face and he scrambled over to crouch next to me, placing his hand on one shoulder as he peered into my face.

"What? What is it?"

"It's –"

I stammered and stopped. I could not tell him I'd been dreaming of him making love with me for a few years. I could not tell him that it was only his hair that I recognized from my dreams.

"It's nothing. You look –"

Again I paused.

"Different. With your hair like that you look different, that's all. Sorry. Silly me." A false-sounding laugh rattled forth, jarring even to my own ears. "Change your hairstyle and I feel as if I should introduce myself to you all over again. Haha."

I forced a little laugh. This time the humour was less hollow, less false. He bought it. He shook his head and his dark ringlets bounced and swayed in the morning sunlight. I swallowed the twist of envy that came up from my belly and then swallowed again to make sure it went down and stayed down. It was unfair that a man should have such a glorious head of hair.

"Well," he drawled, his voice making my breath catch, "I thought since you showed me yours I should show you mine."

We laughed together then, and this time it was true laughter for me too. The mirth washed away any lingering awkwardness.

"It's lovely," I said, reaching out to run his strands through my fingers. His hair felt nothing like my afro. It was softer and unlike mine, his grew downward not upward. I felt a disproportional pride at that. It's only the special ones whose hair defies gravity. You may argue but you will never make me change my mind. His hair might have been easier to manage, but ultimately it's just hair. Mine is an antenna to the gods!

"You keep it long," I said, again displaying that annoying tendency I have to state the obvious. I was a bit annoyed with him for having easier and longer hair. My annoyance came out as disdain and I felt him stiffen. A new tension entered the space between us.

"Yes. I do." His response was decidedly brief.

I stole a glance and found him staring into the distance. It was still early morning and nothing stirred except the wind. Birds chirped somewhere out of sight and I sighed, dismayed at the thought of a day of walking in the sun. Maybe Ras was right and we should spend another day here and travel at night. I pulled away from contemplations of the day when I realised Ras was saying something.

"What? Sorry, I got distracted. Were you saying something?" I turned to look at him and found myself caught in his dark eyes. I looked away quickly. He smiled, and I smiled back.

"I said, ask me about my hair and you'll need to make sure you're sitting because it can take a while. Tell me, do your eyes turn gold every time you make love?"

The abrupt change in direction caught me off-guard and it was several seconds before I was able to respond. "Er. I don't know. It's…uhm…never been mentioned before."

I felt uncomfortable, more naked than I already was. I wished I had put on clothes or that I had something to hide my body. Was he asking about past lovers? Was he really asking if I'd made love before? He would have been a first-class idiot to think the night before and this morning was me being virginal! The lunacy of this made me want to laugh but I managed to quell that desire and instead I only smiled. Broadly.

"Khaya lami." His voice was a whisper, almost under his breath but I caught the words and pretended I hadn't, just as he was pretending not to have spoken.

"The sun is up," I said, stupidly.

We pumped for each other and showered, and then we were on our way.

Chapter 14

Sonto

It didn't matter what direction I looked in, all I could see was rolling blue sky and sun-bleached grass stretching far and away to merge with more rolling blue sky. Not a single cloud in sight. If any sky-watchers still lived that would have been the perfect place for seeing into the future and making sense of the past. The sky was uninterrupted, brilliant blue for miles around.

I must confess that on that first full day of walking I complained bitterly. The sun was hot. I was thirsty. Ras walked too fast. Why would he not let me set the pace? On and on. It wasn't until the second evening that Ras called me to order. We had been walking to the soundtrack of my complaining until Ras turned off the barely visible path towards a clump of bushes that made a dark, irregular shape in a landscape of dark, irregular shapes. The sun had set and it was steadily getting darker.

"This is where we'll stop." I did not argue.

We had to walk off course for a while to find fresh water but Ras knew the terrain so it was no trouble at all. We had our usual meal of coarse. Sinyoka bread – it keeps very well if you know how to make it – and the dried meat. We still had a few oranges to serve as dessert so we ate a couple, and then we got ready for the night.

On the third evening Ras chose a stand of rocks balanced atop of each other, and we made camp there. He loosed his backpack and let it thump at his feet, raising a small cloud of dust. A short while after we had supper we lay in comfortable silence side-by-side, sleeping gear laid close together. We had not made love since we left the Khaya tree, nor did we discuss it. Strangely, there was no awkwardness about it at all.

The sky was so big and wide that looking up into it was like falling upward. I could almost feel the infinite knowledge carried by the stars but too soon I was asleep and the night passed uneventfully. Ras expected to reach the Fields of Stone sometime the next day, and once past the Stone Fields we would cross the mountains. I asked him how difficult that would be.

"Not difficult at all," he said. "There's a pass that will get us to the other side quickly and safely. It usually takes about a day or so to get to the ocean from the Stone Fields so that gives you an idea of how easy it is."

***

We came upon the lone hut late that afternoon, when the sun was on the last leg of her homeward descent. We put down our satchels at the foot of yet another rocky protrusion, this one consisting of four huge boulders balancing precariously atop one another. The bottom one was so wide that it took more than a few minutes to walk its circumference; the highest was barely visible. Such formations had become more plentiful as we walked further eastward. I had never seen boulders so gigantic, and I was curious as to their origin. Ras said we were now in the Stone Fields and would soon reach the mountains.

The landscape had changed. The long, swaying grasses of the savannah had given way to scrubland, patches of short dry grass and the huge rocky outcrops or balancing rocks as I came to think of them, so numerous that in places the piles almost touched. According to Ras, giants of old had created the piles of boulders dotted across the landscape when two of them fought over a woman, fighting to the point of surrender for the right to marry her. I tried to picture a giantess and two lovelorn giants vying for her attention but gave it up as a bad job. It just did not compute. I had never believed in the existence of giants for the simple reason that I could not imagine that if they did once exist they had failed to subdue and rule puny humans. The boulders in question were huge things, some as big as houses, so enormous that I had trouble imagining any human-like being growing large enough to lift let alone throw them. Despite everything I have seen and lived through, imagination is still not my strong suit.

Ras pointed out the faraway blues and purples that were the mountains against the horizon and went on with the tale. The two giants had each uprooted a mountain intending to smash the other beneath it. When the mountains crashed into each other mid-air, the rocky shrapnel became the huge boulders now strewn over the plains. The family matriarch – giants lived in matriarchal societies, did you know? – made her quarrelling sons pick up after themselves which they did, arranging the boulders in neat-ish piles. That, Ras said, is how we came to have these piles of boulders going all the way to the base of the mountains. The Fields of Stone.

"They must have been huge beings, I mean uprooting mountains and all?" I meant for him to laugh because, come on, uprooting mountains? But he took my question seriously and answered.

"Well," he began, "They *were* giants. I don't think you understand quite how big they must have been to uproot entire mountains." I was slightly disappointed that he believed in what was obviously a fairy tale, but I let it go.

"Alright fine. I get it. Giants, mountains, rock piles. Got it."

I liked the rock piles for the cover they gave. One day I was walking through long grass with nowhere to find privacy except maybe, if I was lucky, behind a spindly ameva tree, and the next there were huge rock piles all over the place. I was suddenly spoilt for choice of bathroom. The only thing missing was a rock pool – now *that* would have been lovely. As it was, bathing was a thing of the past, and I was secretly worried that the water we carried would run out before we found more. We had not found even the tiniest stream since leaving the savannah. I said nothing because Ras did this for a living – taking people to Njelele – and if there was cause for alarm I trusted him to alert me.

The balancing rocks didn't just provide cover for me to pee in private, they also provided solid shelter at night. I definitely preferred these new sleeping arrangements: me between Ras and a rock pile, feeling quite safe. The first night we arranged our sleeping bags in this manner, I joked about being between a rock and a hard man, daring to hope Ras would notice the innuendo. He didn't, he just looked at me with his sharp eyes and went on arranging his sleeping bag. I spent the long minutes until I fell asleep that night wondering if perhaps I had gone too far, and asking myself why I cared.

On this particular afternoon, an unusual outline had reared up on the horizon straight ahead. When the shape resolved into a lone dwelling as we drew closer, I grew excited at the thought of sleeping indoors again after so long. Ras was more hesitant.

"Sonto, think this through. I've never seen this hut before so how safe can it be? Did it just spring up out of nowhere? Magic is strong this close to the coast, let's not take any foolish risks, alright? Besides, it's getting dark quite quickly."

I ignored him. I dropped my satchel and continued walking. I was going to see for myself.

"I'm going to see what's inside. You can stay here," I said, walking away.

He lunged to grab me but I was out of reach. Besides, I knew something he didn't. If there had been danger anywhere around or if exploring the hut had been a bad idea, I would

have known. My hair would have uncurled or something. Nothing happened, so nothing was going to happen and I was going to explore the hut. Still, I didn't really want to enter it alone. I walked a few more steps and then turned to face Ras who still stood motionless, watching me. It was growing too dark to see his expression but I imagined him frowning. I put a smile in my voice.

"Come on, you're an adventurer!" I called playfully. "Are you afraid of an empty hut?" I smiled wide in the falling darkness, then turned away again hoping he would accept the challenge. He did.

Annoyance wafted off him as he strode past me, body held stiff. I followed him, letting him keep two steps ahead of me. His back was straight; his shoulders held back, his long Nguni braid hanging between his shoulder blades. I smiled to myself. Walking determinedly towards a lone hut in the middle of nowhere with darkness falling and no idea what he would find inside, all because he was annoyed with me.

I let my eyes wander over his back imagining, in the gloom, the well-defined, strong shoulders. I could not control the thrill that sparked through my body to thrum in my groin and encircle the globes of my breasts. Confident that Ras was blissfully unaware of the fire raging within me I loped the last few steps and caught up with him in front of the broken-down door.

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There was no need to knock. The door, such as it was, barely covered the doorway and it was obvious from the profusion of grass, growing right up to the dirt step, that the little round hut was uninhabited and had been so for a long time.

The hut was simple. Round walls, a rather well-made thatch roof (it was intact), the rickety door, and that was it. Although the dwelling was empty, it did not feel dead and I knew this was where I wanted to spend the night. The doorframe was made of wood which had weathered to a cracked, grey-coloured piece of dry timber, as useless as the equally weathered wooden door it held. This had fallen apart when Ras pushed it open and now lay in three sad-looking planks on the dusty floor. I entered behind Ras and stood just inside the doorway, next to him. The sun was already below the horizon but in the low light available it was plain to see that the simple mud room was bare. A lone lantern stood on a shelf that ran the back of the room at eye level, a book of matches next to it.

"Whoever built this dwelling keeps the old ways," Ras said, crossing the room. "It's considered good manners to leave fixings for a fire and for light. I think we will be safe here

after all." Striking a match, he put the flame to the lantern's wick. Lucent light filled the room; surprisingly steady given its source.

Both of us gasped as dozens of shadows sprung up on the walls. There were far more shadows than could be accounted for by the two of us and we watched, mouths open, as dark figures danced and swayed about on the curving walls. We could hear no accompanying music but the figures moved rhythmically, slender ones and more rotund ones and every shape and size in between. Although not quite in sync, there was nonetheless a unity to the movements made by the shadow figures. Soon enough, the random gestures became scenes of dance: various genres somehow projected onto the blank mud walls of the standalone hut. A couple slow danced here, next to what looked like the smaller figures of youths or children leaping and whirling in a group dance. Over there, unmistakeably male figures performed what must have been a war dance, legs raised high and feet brought down in unison repeatedly in a fascinating rhythm that matched that of the group of female-shaped figures gyrating nearby. Ras and I walked the interior circumference of the hut hand in hand, in silence. I felt no fear and I don't think Ras did either. I suspect we were too caught up in the magic to be aware of anything but the otherworldly figures before us.

They danced and twirled and played and we watched in delight, enthralled. We walked around the hut, following one dancing character to the next, not a word passing between us. As we completed yet another circuit Ras pulled me towards the mud bench that encircled the hut. It was wide enough to sit on quite comfortably and despite the dust, we sat. The light from the lantern pulsed once, then twice, before settling into a much brighter brilliance than before. The shadows darkened and shrank, then disappeared. The walls were blank brown mud once more.

I turned to Ras and found him staring at me, expressionless.

"You're doing it again." He lifted one hand and brushed it against my cheek, looking into my eyes. "And your hair is doing its thing. Even your skin."

I glanced at my arms then down at my bare legs. He was right. My skin had taken on a gleaming golden radiance. I was having trouble deciding which phenomenon to address first. My thoughts would not come under control; the insurrection in my head was largely successful.

"Did you see that?" Easier to address the shadows first. Knowing what powered the dancing shadows would likely answer the question of why I felt warm and light-headed, not

to mention that my skin was gleaming like polished mukwa wood. I wanted him to say yes and explain what had just happened.

"Yes Sonto I saw that. And what's more, I know what it was."

My eyes widened and I leaned toward him, eager to hear. He fidgeted on the bench next to me and I got the impression that he was settling down for a long talk. I thought about asking him to bring our satchels in first. They were still near the rock pile where we were going to spend the night but I decided against it. Nothing would happen to them and we could always fetch them later. He looked around the bare room and my gaze followed his.

In the unexpectedly bright light of the lantern, there were almost no shadows and, apart from the lantern and the little book of matches set next to it, there was not even a stray spoon or cup on the shelf. The shelf was made of mud, just like the bench we sat on, which ran all the way around the room. The convenience of bricks and cement had not made it out this far. They constructed everything out of mud and thatch.

A thick layer of dust covered the floor, which had been undisturbed until Ras and I walked in. The floor itself was made of layers of cow-dung cement poured over packed earth. The builders would have had to add a new layer every few days to make the floor impervious. No bird or animal droppings or any remains thereof littered the floor, so one could quite reasonably conclude that nothing and no one had come into this hut since whoever left it last had left. There was no way of telling who had lived here, or even if anyone ever had – and if they had – when they left.

The rondavel was exceptionally well-built for a hut in the middle of the bush; only the derelict door was out of place. The windows had no glass of course; they were merely roughly round openings in the walls. The walls were exceptionally thick and the window openings so deep-set that even the fiercest storm would not have been anything but a noisy nuisance to the occupants. The thick curved walls and the tight-packed thatch made the hut impervious to the elements and told the story that whoever built this place had experienced no shortage of material or labour. It was probably magicked for protection too. The magicking was why birds or pests had not invaded the hut and why weeds had not overrun it.

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The light from the lantern had dimmed and my skin had returned to normal. I trusted Ras when he said my eyes were no longer glowing. The lower light from the lantern saturated the room with a new intimacy. My earlier arousal flared back to life with an intensity that made me switch position on the mud bench and sit with my legs crossed one over the other.

Perhaps it was the darkness outside, perhaps it was the intimacy of the little hut, and perhaps it was the light from the lantern. Whatever it was it made me want Ras and I wanted him very much. I wanted him on top of me and inside me; I wanted him groaning into my ear and lightly biting my throat. I wanted him tonguing my nipples; I wanted him driving into me. A wave of desire washed over me and I let out an audible moan, overly sexual even to my own ears, pent up desire and frustration springing to life.

I hid my face in my hands. I heard Ras draw breath to speak but he must not have found the words he needed. He sighed heavily but remained silent. I thought he would put an arm around me in a show of concern at least, but he didn't. He did not touch me nor did he acknowledge that anything untoward had happened.

"Do you remember the Khaya tree?" His voice was even but the words came out quickly, falling over one another like the afterthought one has decided to give voice to. My head came up and I scowled at him, annoyed. The Khaya tree? How could I forget that tree? That tree under which –

Coherent thought fled to be replaced by sepia images of two figures – one big and rampantly male and the other smaller and undeniably female – writhing and exploring each other beneath a gigantic tree. The throbbing between my legs grew steadily intense.

Ras kept silent and I got the distinct impression that he was waiting for something. The brief glances he gave my legs – pressed tightly closed – and my clenched fists – forced open when I realised he was looking – made me wonder if he somehow knew that my blood was rushing in my ears and pounding elsewhere. I felt faint. I leaned back against the wall, hyper-aware of my own arousal.

Turning my gaze inward I examined my body from the inside. It was similar to what Nona had done to me; I had learned a new skill from that painful episode. Instead of focusing on my mind, I examined my entire body. If there was something wrong, if feeling faint was not a side-effect of extreme and prolonged arousal such as this man was putting me through, I would find the cause.

I started at my neck and worked my way down, focusing on each body part, listening to it, trying to detect wrongness in any part of my body. I opened my mind and let my senses roam, poking and prodding to find the cause of this unease. Warm golden light enveloped my body except around my groin and chest where the light was brilliant white. Looking at my own body's light imprint I found it both amusing and frustrating that the only thing wrong with me was that I was white-hot with arousal.

I briefly considered telling Ras about my ability to perceive wrongness in my own body, but I didn't. I was still learning how it worked; it was too soon to share it with anyone. Besides, what answer would I have given if he had asked me what was wrong?

I could feel the soft cotton of my t-shirt against my otherwise bare breasts and between my legs, the press of the crotch seam was maddeningly delicious. I slid partway down the bench as if I had a new-found appreciation for slouching, which had the desired effect of making my shorts bunch tighter around my crotch, thus forcing the seam a little deeper into my tender flesh. I tried to make my movements as discreet as possible. I had every intention of resuming the conversation. I wanted to know why now, today, he had brought up the Khaya tree.

"Sonto," Ras began, placing a hand on my knee. I never knew what he wanted to say because in the instant his hand landed, lucid thought fled my mind. My mouth went dry and my eyes closed as brilliant shards of light like sunbursts exploded throughout my body. I felt a falling sensation and I closed my eyes tighter. I heard rushing winds and then as abruptly as the sensations and sounds had begun, they stopped. I kept my eyes closed for a few seconds, my ears pricked for danger and my heart thudding in my chest. I heard nothing but far-away music.

Chapter 15

Sonto

I opened my eyes to a place where the air was melodic and the light gentle. In the blue-green sky, closer than it should have been, hung a perfect golden ball, perhaps the sun of this strange place, which gave off a warm, low light and very little heat. The light quality would have been poor for photographs but it was enough to see by. The slight breeze was neither warm nor cool.

There was no way to tell what time of day it was. The sky rolled and heaved like an upside-down sea, now teal, now a darker blue, all the shades of blue and green that could possibly exist, run through with little glints and sparks of gold. There was neither darkening nor lightening of the sky, it was as if time was suspended. I began to pay attention to the music that drifted by on the clear air, just above the edge of hearing. It rose and fell in passion but not in volume. If I stood perfectly still and held my breath I could hear it quite clearly, beautiful notes that nevertheless carried discernible notes of sadness. When I moved the music would fade until it was barely noticeable, until it was a very faint tinkle of notes in the background.

Clods of rich brown earth flecked with tufts of bright green grass stretched away as far as I could see; undulating brown earth and green grass met blue-green sky. There were no trees or buildings and nothing moved except the roiling sky above. I was alone, just me and the earth, the sky, and the golden-ball sun. I turned in a slow circle, taking in more sky, more tilled field stretching away to blend with the gently swelling rolling sky where blues and greens and tiny sparks of gold leapt and twisted over each other like the many coloured waters of tropical seas. I'd not yet seen the sea by then you understand, but now that I know the magnificence of the ocean, that is the only way to begin to describe that sky.

The place was both strange and familiar; everything I saw was something I knew. I knew earth, I knew the sky even if the sky I knew was far duller than what I now beheld. I knew the sun, too, albeit a far bigger and brighter one than this dreary version. This, it hit me, was my world, the real world, when it was very young. Or perhaps, I looked at the sky again and took in the air of sadness that hung about the place, this would be my world when it was very old. I looked around again. Nothing to see but the tiny grass trying to cling onto the clods of earth. The soil was thick, clumpy and very dark. Fertile, then. And yet, the plant life was so sparse, there was not a single mature blade of grass anywhere, and no other vegetation.

I'd registered the fact of my nakedness when I first opened my eyes, when the rushing winds fell silent, but I had refused to let it settle into my consciousness. Now I had no choice. The reality was that I was naked and alone in a place that played beautiful if unfamiliar music. And Ras? Who knew what different magic would spring from the walls of that hut? There I stood, a solitary, nude figure in an empty field with nothing but sun and sky for company.

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"Where is your man, child? The one who brought you here?"

I whirled around with my heart in my throat and a hand to my chest. I was startled for I had not heard anyone approach. The voice was feminine, neither young nor old. The woman I now faced was old, older even than the oldest woman I had ever seen, Nona. A pang shot through my heart when Wisest's face flashed through my mind, the memory unexpected in its intensity. Wisest who had been the great healer in Ekuthuleni and died when I was a child, whom I'd barely met before she was gone, Wisest who should have taught me what I needed to know about magic and things about snakes, who was killed by Sanuse. I clutched my chest, overwhelmed by the greatness of my loss. Wisest, who would walk around the village with her thick white hair unbound and reaching up to the sky as if searching for answers, gone long before I knew who I was. My mother told me once that healers' hair grows towards the sun because that's where they get their strength, and that their hair conducts energy and power directly from the sun and the Ancients. I asked her if I was going to be a healer too but Mother had just laughed.

"No Sonto, no, of course not. Your hair doesn't grow out, it's just short that's all. It's still too short to hang."

My hair was armpit-length when I stretched it but the coils were so tiny that left alone it shrunk to a black halo around my head, an afro. Really cute but unfortunately not what was popular. Back then my hair was rarely left alone. Every Sunday night until she died my mother would spend half the day putting my hair into plastic Norther braids. She hated to see my hair loose and did the fashionable thing: she used plastic hair to hide mine away. If we had known then what we know now we would never have let the Northers tell us what to do with our hair. On that day I let Mother's comment about my hair pass and instead I changed the subject. I asked where Sanuse got his power since he was bald and a healer. She had told me to hush and not question the ways of those above me. The memory passed and I straightened, facing the Gogo before me once more. She had not said a word.

She stood before me, a straight-backed salukazi smiling deeply, her dark eyes twinkling in her face, and making me want to smile back. She was of advanced age but steady on her feet and firm of voice, strong; but the years could be seen in her eyes and in her flowing hair, so long it grazed her waist when it wasn't billowing behind her. It was pure white, her hair, and wavy. It seemed to have a life of its own. The waves and huge curls that made up her thick mane were in constant motion, curling and coiling, at times rising to float about her head. The strands never obscured her vision, they were never anything more than a beautiful performance. I felt my own hair unbraid and begin its own motion. I wished it was long enough to put on as magnificent a display. I could not see it of course but I knew what I was working with. I was bald compared to the woman before me.

She had not a single wrinkle or line on her face but her great age was unquestionable. She radiated deep knowledge of secret things. Her eyes were pools of inky blackness filled with dancing light. I had never before seen dark eyes blaze with that degree of intensity. She stood as tall as my shoulder and although her white robe was billowy and hid the outlines of her body, her slim almost child-like wrists and ankles were visible. Her skin was striking, blemish-free. It glowed with vitality as if the life-force in her was as vibrant as her years were many. She was gorgeously golden-brown, a deep rich complexion that shimmered and gleamed as if molten gold surged beneath her skin. I envied her the glow.

In contrast to the glowing white-clad woman I felt exposed and ugly in my nakedness. I lifted my head a notch higher and let my arms hang at my sides, opposing the instinct to hide my nudity, stubbornly refusing even to use my hands to cover my breasts and the apex of my thighs. I had been brought here naked and if they – whoever they were, whoever had brought me here – wanted me dressed well, then they would have to do something about it.

Despite my attitude I was disconcerted by my lack of clothing and disoriented by the old woman's inexplicable appearance. The steady calm with which I'd been contemplating my situation had left me and I was bursting with questions and curiosity.

"You're learning the power of your magic and I'm very glad for that. Focus on the power within you and the calm will never leave. You, obviously, are not weak." At this she gestured at my hair and smiled at me as if I knew what she was talking about.

A hundred questions rushed through my mind, none of them the right one to voice first. I remained silent, watching her. I was wary and more than a little confused but not in the least bit frightened. I had begun to accept who I am the day Wundlu appeared to me. Magical things do not frighten magical people and that's all there is to it. We may be disconcerted, or

confused, or unhappy, or anything else really, but we are never afraid of who we are. This was magic, I was learning, and I was not afraid of it.

"You really should get dressed, little one." She remained where she was and made no movement. "I'm happy you're here but I cannot keep gazing upon your nakedness, lovely though you are."

As she spoke she made a movement with both hands, movement too brief for my eyes to follow. Lengths of a gossamer-thin silky material flowed over my body, wrapping around my chest and fastening themselves at shoulder and waist. The material transformed into long loose trousers as it flowed over my legs, accompanied by a form-fitting bodice over my upper body, long sleeves attaching to the bodice. When the swish of the silken movements stopped I was covered from chest to ankle and from shoulder to wrist in the delicate material. It was disorienting but I was too grateful for the covering to protest. Unlike her pure white robe, my clothing was the colour of flames and it flickered and flared as I moved about under the golden light of the odd sun, admiring myself. I twisted this way and that way to see how the costume was constructed but I found no seams or knots. Here and there the garment reflected what I thought to be the sky, splashes of iridescent blue-green appearing and disappearing at random. To my mind, the picture I presented was not dissimilar to a dozen shining candles and their blue-green hearts.

"Pretty, isn't it? But I think you'd be more comfortable in a dress, wouldn't you?" Again the material responded to her words and the silky cloth flowed this way and that way until, when it finally stilled, I was clad in a beautiful orange gown with shimmering patches of turquoise and teal and every colour in-between shifting across the orange background. I could see the tops of my breasts this time and I gulped. I never worn anything so beautiful that fit so perfectly.

I ended my examination of the dress but part of my attention was held by the shifting patches of blue and green.

"I thought you'd like those. You are water after all. Part water."

She must have seen the confusion on my face because she chuckled, a musical sound like a sunlit stream flowing over rock smoothed by years of bonding with water. I found myself chuckling too without knowing why.

"I should explain. Come. Sit." She stretched out one arm and there appeared, only a few steps away from where we stood, an enormous tree with a trunk so wide behind which you could hide a small family. Buttress roots supported the massive trunk and it was

impossible to see how tall it was from so close up. It stood there as if it had not appeared only moments earlier. I let my mouth fall open. It was the twin of the Khaya tree under which Ras and I had –

On seeing my astonishment, the old woman chortled but took me by the hand and walked me over to the tree. On closer examination I realised that it was even bigger than the other one. These buttress roots were almost waist-high, creating cosy alcoves that could comfortably shelter three or four adults sitting side by side. In one of these alcoves a Nguni cow skin was spread on the springy green grass that covered the ground beneath and around the tree; a completely different scene from the rough clods that made up the rest of the landscape. The cow skin was in fact several layers of leather sewn together and topped with the Nguni skin for aesthetic appeal. The entire mat was beautiful and soft, supple like the best leather. On the topmost skin, the Nguni cowhide was white with a splash of red spots of varying sizes marching in parallel lines down the middle of the skin, from top to bottom. The simplicity of the pattern made it all the more beautiful. The pang of pain I felt at remembering Wisest had dulled and in its place there rose something else. I was touched by this nod to my heritage and I knew the choice of marking was not an accident. A line of red spots going from throat to flank on both sides of an Nguni cow were, to my family, a sign of the Ancients' approval of our undertakings. Living in Ekuthuleni my family had not kept cattle in years but we all knew the family insignia used on battlefields in the old days of war, and this was it. I felt affirmed and strengthened, a newfound joy coursed through me. I still had not said anything but I could feel laughter bubbling up inside me as if everything, including my arrival in this strange place, was a joyful pleasure. For whatever reason and in spite of whatever situation, I was inexplicably, surpassingly happy.

In that moment I let the music within me burst free. I laughed and laughed. I left my body and flew through time and space, learning mysteries and gathering knowledge. I saw as if watching from above the distance I'd covered with Ras; saw the dwellings of Ekuthuleni and then there was the stand-alone hut and I laughed for joy at how far I had travelled and how much closer to my destination I was. From my perspective, looking down at the world from on high I could see the hut, and there, closer than I expected, were the mountains. They were indeed no more than hills as Ras had said. Over the mountains lay the shining ocean, dazzling in its brilliance. Somewhere on that coast, somewhere along it though I knew not where exactly, we would find Njelele. I tried to move closer to the mountains but something

held me back and except for the shining ocean beyond the mountains I could see no farther than I had travelled.

Turning away from that I saw the first Khaya tree and beneath it two figures moving to a rhythm as old as ages. I felt a pull in my loins and I laughed more joyously still, pleasure saturating all my senses. I didn't know or care how I was doing this or whether it was being done to me. I felt free in a way that took me beyond anything I thought was possible.

I saw my past and I loved it, and I saw teeny, tiny glimpses of the future. Like the ocean, I knew it would bring me face to face with my destiny. How right it all was, how right that those two were under the tree, and when I drifted away from that scene and could see into the hut, I laughed at Ras and myself standing enthralled by the dancing shadows. All around me and inside me was exuberance and joy. It felt absolutely right that I should be viewing scenes from my own past life. I had to know where I had been to know where I was going. Understanding bloomed in my head as I drifted back down towards the old woman.

I sat on the Nguni skin that marked this cow as one dedicated to my ancestors and gathered the delicate dress around me. I did not get distracted by the unusual colours. The flight across time and space to revisit moments of my journey had given me a peace I could not explain about the things that had happened to me. I could feel unexplored knowledge unfolding in my mind and I welcomed it.

I looked at the sun, dull golden-ball casting soft blurry shadows and knew that in this place I too was a creator. I knew that the sky was blue-green because that was the colour of the sea, and water is one of my elements. The dress the salukazi had given me reflected the sky in part, yes, but also the sea that loved me and that I would love when I met it. I knew that the flame represented the sun and the Ancients and also fire, the other element. I carried both.

I knew too why Sanuse's yellow was wrong, why it was so flat and had none of the aliveness of the golden tones that Wisest and Nona and even I carried. He was a man trying to do a woman's job and doing it wrong. I felt no anger at him, only pity. What it was to be a man and feel only strong enough to fight women. I knew then that the power he carried was strong, strong enough that he was corrupted and didn't even know it. No good could come of him being alone in Ekuthuleni, now a village of women and children who barely survived a massacre. At last I understood the urgency with which Ras and I had left Sinyoka.

I knew then that I had to free Ekuthuleni from Sanuse and whatever power was using him. Despite all I now knew and the promise of knowledge embedded in my bones, I still had to go eNjelele to learn how to do what needed to be done.

I cleared my throat. The Gogo had closed her eyes and now she ignored me. "Ahem."

"Hush, child. Patience." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "What is it? Have you decided where to start?"

"Well, you're here for a reason. You tell me where to start." I looked her straight in the eye as I spoke. "Please."

"You are an unusually powerful healer because of your two magics, stone and water, and because you're a child of the sun like all Wester wielders are. You are not supremely powerful, however." She cocked one eyebrow at me. "Nali was right. You are the one."

She was nodding as she spoke, her dark eyes twinkling at me with shared knowledge that I could not decipher. Nali? The name triggered a childhood memory. My parents arguing, an old argument that resurfaced every now and again, Sanuse at the centre of it. I could have asked what connection this woman had with Wisest's snake but I filed that thought away under "magical things to find out later". At that point I had bigger concerns and I voiced the most immediate one.

"The one to do what?" I asked. It sounded very much like Sanuse telling me I was "chosen" and convincing me to leave for eNjelele. My guard was up in an instant.

"Do you think that everything that has happened to you thus far happens to everybody?"

The old woman managed to make me feel small and stupid at the same time.

"I don't have time for your vanity, Sonto. I'm not here to reassure you. She was shouting by the end of this speech and I was stunned into silence. "Why do you think you are going to Njelele? For a holiday?"

Throughout it all her hair had streamed out behind her, the wild movements as impassioned as her voice. When her rant was over, her hair settled into gently rolling waves around her shoulders. The now-familiar and slightly erotic tug of my own hair doing the same drew my attention but I forced myself to ignore it. She – I still did not know what to call her – was speaking again, this time in her normal voice, no longer shouting.

"I apologise. I should not have lost my temper. Only, there is not much time and there is much you must learn. Do you know where you are?"

I shook my head.

"This is your future. You were right, earlier. You must break what needs to be broken and restore what needs restoration. When you get to eNjelele, you will know more."

What did she mean *this is my future*? Was she me in a time to come? The thought hurt my head and I let it slide away unexamined. Break what needs breaking? Restore –

"I'm sorry," I burst out. "What are you talking about? I have no idea what you're talking about!" I was agitated and had scrambled to my feet as I spoke. The cow skin was a strange texture of rough and smooth beneath my bare feet.

"There is so much you should have learnt by now but the Ancients have been good to you, regardless. You are much blessed and favoured." She waved a hand in the air. "What do you know about the Ancients?"

That question again. "Not much," I replied. "I never attended the communal rituals and my parents never let me consult. Still, I know by now that what I need to know will come to me when I need to know it." I thought it was important to remind her that I had not done badly thus far, despite my ignorance.

She frowned, her smooth brow wrinkling for a beat. "Your mother was wrong to keep you away from the rituals of your people and it's because of that man, that yellow-skinned waste of magic that passes for Ekuthuleni's healer. Our people perish, Sonto. You must not let that happen."

Her dark eyes blazed gold for an instant and her hair lifted off her shoulders again to form a white halo around her head. I felt a prickling on my scalp and goose bumps sprung up along my arms. My own hair untwisted and again I felt that tug deep inside. I thought of Ras.

"No! Stop that!"

At the commanding note in the old woman's voice I snapped back to the present, ashamed of myself for getting distracted by *that*.

She continued as if she'd never said anything. "Don't worry about the hair. It will do what it does. It's only a sign to others of what you are and as you can see, your hair will respond to strong emotion you feel, and to power. It can be quite – erotic – at times, and an embarrassment at others." She winked. She knew. I felt my face warm up.

Her hair drifted back down to her shoulders, now and then stretching to its full length and reaching to her waist. Her hair was incredible; I admit to a touch of jealousy. My gently exploring hands confirmed that my own hair still stood on end but in a few moments it lay against my skull once more. Well, I say *lay*, but that's for a given value of lay when you have afro hair.

“What were you doing just before you found yourself here?” The change in conversational direction was unexpected and it took me a few seconds to catch up.

The dancing figures and the magic that filled the little hut had together heightened my desire for Ras. I was about to beg him to make love to me when his touch on my knee took me places, to understate a fact. More warmth flooded my face and I avoided meeting her eyes, looking downward and pretending to examine the spots on the cow skin. I said nothing.

“The dream state is only accessible to healers in trance state. Usually the healer performs a ritual to prepare and their presence is that way announced. You just appeared. You have had no training but you are powerful enough that you might have fallen into a trance state accidentally. Did you?”

My mouth was dry; I could not answer. I thought back. Earlier she told me that this was my future and now something about rituals and a dream state that sounded like a place. I was still trying to figure out what I was going to tell her about how I came to be here.

“This place is a non-place. It’s the place inside you where you are connected to everything that is, everyone who has been, and everyone you have ever been and will ever be.”

The confusion on my face must have been plain.

“Sonto.” A sigh. Then she tried again. “You are connected to everything and everything is connected to you. This is true for everyone. You, because you are a powerful wielder, are more aware of this connection, and as such you have a greater responsibility to the world around you. That’s why your hair and your skin respond to magic. That’s why you are here. To learn.”

I understood nothing. “So let me get this straight.” I ticked off each item on my fingers. “This place is my future but it’s also inside me, my potential. I have a responsibility to the world around me because I have magic. Right now, my responsibility is to Ekuthuleni. Did I get it right?”

“Don’t try to be smart.” She smiled as she said it. “I know about your mind-journey, Sonto. I was there, remember? When are you going to understand that I’m you and I know everything you know and more besides?”

“You’re me but you’re really everyone I’m connected to. Everyone I’ve ever been, my ancestors…You know everything I can ever know and I’m here because unlike me…” I gave it some thought. I was excited by the connections I was making. “So you can tell me about eNjelele, right?”

The old woman smiled at me. I guess I could say I smiled at myself – you know what I mean. She smiled, but it was a sad smile. “No, Sonto. Life must still be lived. You are not exempt from that.”

She was confusing me again but after a few moments of silent contemplation I thought I understood. Life must still be lived. There was knowing, but after that there had to come doing and then would come more knowing.

“Now, your time here is not unlimited. The longer you stay here the longer you’ll have to rest in the real world. You still need to get to eNjelele and back home, remember? Just because time is of no consequence here does not mean it’s not passing in the real world.”

I needed to get back to Ras. There was just one more thing.

“Er.” I didn’t know what to call her. “Er, Gogo, when I first got here you asked me about my man. What did you mean by that?”

She chuckled and I found myself joining her.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Well, you were mortified when I asked how you came here without training and now here you are bringing up the very same subject.” Again with the laughter. She managed to gather herself enough to answer me. “Your hair rises to meet the sun; you are child of the sun, of fire. Your journey is taking you to eNjelele; you are a child of water too. You lay with the man underneath the Khaya tree; what did you think would happen? That’s a special tree.”

Now I was really confused.

She paid no attention and went on, “Your hair and the man, the tree – it’s all connected. You would not be here without him.”

This time the words came. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Sonto,” she sounded exasperated, “your magic is both creative and destructive. Well, actually those are the same thing. Your power creates and destroys. You sealed your union with the man under the Khaya tree, and how can two build unless they first destroy? I can’t say it any better than that. And now you really must go. It will be morning soon and you must get to eNjelele before sunset tomorrow.”

I don’t know how she could tell how much time had passed.

“When you come here again your exit will be gentler but for now I’m afraid this will have to do.” She thrust out both her arms in a shoving motion. She didn’t touch me but I felt her push and I fell backwards. And kept on falling.

The sound of rushing winds. A brief tinkle of music. A flash of blue-green sky and then I was back in the little hut, back in my body, back with Ras.

"Worry not, little one. You are on the right path."

The words came out of thin air and I looked around almost expecting to see the salukazi standing there. All I saw was Ras silently watching me, and the bare mud walls of the magical hut.

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I came to lying on my sleeping bag, and now I sat up. Ras had brought in the satchels and laid out food and water. Given his earlier reluctance to enter I was surprised. He was still sitting on the bench. He must have moved to bring in our things and lie me down, but he was so still now, as if he had not moved an inch since we sat down together after watching the dancing shadows.

He said nothing for long moments. I didn't know how to explain what had happened. Darkness had just fallen when I went into the trance and now it was full night and I was strangely tired. The old woman was right. This was exhausting. I gave a huge yawn and quickly covered my mouth.

"Nona was right."

Talk about coming out of nowhere. I had no idea what he was talking about.

"What?"

"She told me this would happen. Not this exactly." He lapsed into silence.

"Told you what would happen?" I climbed into my sleeping bag as he spoke. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not just here as your guide, Sonto. I've been waiting for you."

It took a while but eventually his words registered and I fought my way back from sleep.

"Whaa…?" I could barely keep my eyes open but I wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I lied to you, earlier, about not knowing this hut. I know this hut. Well, I don't know it so much as know about it."

When I said nothing he went on speaking.

"I've been guiding travellers for a few years now It was something to do while I waited for you. I couldn't believe it when Nona told me you had come and then when I saw you and your hair did that thing, and then under the tree…"

I felt my anger rise. “So, you do that with all your clients, is that what you’re telling me?”

He looked at me, eyes wide. “What? Sonto, no. Of course not!”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about but thank you for – sharing.”

I was upset and I didn’t know why. I did know why. The idea that he could have experienced that magic with someone else was too horrible, too humiliating to contemplate. I had not allowed myself to think about it but now I was confronted with the fact that Ras had a life outside of me and I was not ready. I turned my back to him, fighting back tears that I convinced myself came from anger.

“Sonto, I’m trying to tell you something. I was waiting for *you*. I was told things so that I would know you, like that you would come from the west and be travelling east –”

“Everybody who goes to Njelele is travelling east.”

He ignored my interruption as if it hadn’t happened.

“– be travelling east and have magical hair and, believe it or not, I even knew you would have a sensitivity to salvia. It’s the one thing I knew that Nona didn’t. So when she told me you fainted because of the smoke I knew it was you. And then when your hair did that thing when we met, well…” He shrugged. “I thought you might need to know that.”

I stared at him, speechless.

“I’m sleeping now. We have to get to Njelele before sunset tomorrow. That’s what *I* was told.”

I closed my eyes. I was asleep almost immediately because I remembered nothing else until Ras shook me awake to sunlight streaming through the open doorway.

Chapter 16

Sanuse

Darting in and out of his mouth, his tongue roves over his chapped lips. He is annoyed. For a second or two he dwells on the irritation, considering all the many solutions he's tried. Honey – too sticky. Sugar scrubs – the smoothness lasted only a night and in the morning his lips were as chapped as ever. Drinking more water – all that did was make him pee more, another source of irritation. His chapped lips are an irritation and also an imperfection in the work of the Ancients. If the Ancients are perfect – and they are – then he too must be perfect. How can perfection bring forth imperfection? That makes no sense.

Frustrated ,he lets the question of chapped lips go. The itching at the back of his neck returns, and he scratches the broken patch of skin. Today it feels dry and scaly and rasps as he runs his nails over the dry skin. By tomorrow it will be a weeping sore and then the patch will dry up again in another day or two, but grow just a little bit more. It began as a little bump that he idly scratched, pressing his nail into it, closing his eyes in relief when the itching became a source of pleasure as he continued to scratch and tease the bump. He should have stopped before he hurt himself but he had not been able to stand the itching. He kept scratching until he broke the skin, drew blood, and felt pain instead of pleasure. That had been the beginning. That little bump, nothing more than a pimple, really, had become a patch of irritated skin that continued to grow until now his upper back was covered in dry although sometimes weepy scales that itched and then oozed where the skin was broken beneath his yellow robes.

His movements are jerky, he often forgets that stretching his arms makes the skin crack and hurts him, and so his reach is limited as he gathers supplies. The yellow candle. The wooden bowl filled with clean water. The square of white cloth on which are drawn symbols of an old language, older even than the ritual he is about to perform. The symbols speak of darkness and light and mercy and judgment, whorls that he cannot read, that he has never been able to read. When he stole the cloth and the bowl from the old woman's hut all he knew was that she used it to communicate with the Ancients; he did not concern himself with anything else.

On a low table placed in the centre of the room he arranges everything. On one corner of the table he places the candle, lit. The smoke from the candle flows upward but does not

dissipate. In its depths, a shape begins to coalesce. An observer might notice this phenomenon but Sanuse does not. Not yet. He is too busy arranging everything else.

In the centre of the table he spreads the white cloth with its symbols of power but he does not know that the symbols are upside down. He could not have known how to put the magic artefact to its proper use. He spied on Wisest when she used it, watched her place a lit candle at one corner of the table she used – her candle was white – and smirked. The old woman does not know that only yellow works for magic, he thought to himself as he watched. When Wisest died, the last thing he did was to search the little hut until he found the cloth, neatly folded in her water bowl atop the wardrobe. He took the bowl too, and then came back and replaced it with the broken halves of a random bowl he had. He knew the villagers would not rest until they found her water bowl. He knew too that they would not be able to distinguish it from the pieces he left. He had walked out of Wisest's hut with her things, walking through the fading light still swirling around her cooling body without even glancing at it. Now he is here, in his own hut, about to put the cloth and bowl to use. They say drink deep from the well of knowledge or not at all.

When everything is ready, he undresses and kneels on his yellow robes before the table. He focuses on the candle. Focuses intently until he can make out the shapes swirling in the dark smoke. He closes his eyes, concentrates. Not on a woman, no. The vision that springs up in his mind is that of a man. A man with bulging biceps and thickly muscled shoulders and thighs. He cannot make out a face but that is of no importance. Slowly the room fades and soon all he can see is the man. The faceless man's hands cover his nakedness and he strokes himself slowly and then faster and as he does, Sanuse grows more and more aroused, though he does not touch himself. His breathing is shallow, rapid, and soon he lets out a long, low moan. As he finishes, the smoke thickens. There's far more of it than should come from a single candle. In the smoke something grows and takes on shape. Humanoid, with limbs too long for a squat body. When the smoke has dissipated, what remains on the table between the candle at one corner and the bowl full of water on the other, is a grotesque creature. Sanuse opens his eyes, ejaculate shiny wet on his thighs. He stares at the creature. It stares back.

He licks his lips, vaguely aware of the bits of skin where the chapping is worst, in the centre of his upper lip. He nibbles and swallows what he peels off. The skin on his back begins to burn. He wants to scratch but cannot move, so intense is the creature's stare.

"Who –?" Another nibble. He injects a bit more authority into his voice. "Who are you?"

It strikes him that perhaps the creature cannot speak. A frown appears on his brow. What has gone wrong? He has done exactly as the sage said, the one he kidnapped and tortured many months ago. He could not believe his luck when the old man told him of the summoning ritual, told him that it was this type of communion with the Ancients that gave Wisest her power. Think of what you want most as you climax, the old man said, and the Ancients will grant it. Well here he is, his thighs damp with his cum and a servant of the Ancients staring at him.

"Do you come from the Ancients?" He tries again. The creature shifts then, and Sanuse draws back a little. It will not do to show fear. So he inches forward, his nose wrinkling at the odour emanating from the ugly creature. How had Wisest stood it? Well, she had, obviously, and therefore so would he.

He considers speaking again but what can he say? The creature speaks before he can form a sentence. Its speech is sibilant, as if it has too many teeth. No, not too many teeth he thinks, too many tongues. He is amazed to see three separate tongues curling around its mouth, jagged, black things. The smell grows worse. Rotten eggs and foul bathrooms. He almost gags but if this is the price then he will pay it a thousand times over if it will get him what he wants most.

"You s-sss-summoned me? What do you wantsss?" The creature, a living gargoyle, sits on its haunches. Thankfully, Sanuse thinks to himself, the area where its legs meet is in deep shadow. He shudders. There is nothing to do but respond.

"Er. I, er…I want, er, well… I want to be the most powerful healer in all the land." There. He'd said it. There was no shame in it. After all, if the Ancients had not wanted him to have that power they would not have let him get hold of the old man who told him about this ritual, nor would they have let Wisest die, and they most certainly would have stopped him from pocketing the square of symbol-covered cloth. Yes? Yes. He contemplates the gargoyle, waiting for a response. His thoughts are consumed with his proofs of the Ancients' favour upon him – but wait! It speaks again.

"You would be mo-ss-st powerful if the woman did not s-sstill live." The creature lifts a leg and scratches itself behind one overly-large ear. Confused, Sanuse leans forward, his eagerness to hear overpowering his distaste for the foul odour and allowing him to draw close.

“No, no, no. No.” He shakes his head vigorously. He has forgotten that he is naked as he leans even closer. The yellow skin of his protruding belly is dry and also beginning to crack in places. He whispers urgently, “She is dead, that one. She died. How is it that you do not know this? She died years ago.”

As he leans ever closer the cracked skin on his back breaks open and he winces, pulls back, and now the smell is stronger. He leans back a little more but he is on his knees and can only lean back so far. He desperately wants to scratch, to ease the itching and maybe even the pain but he dare not. He does not want to give offence.

“No. One died, the other lives-ss and grows-ss ever ss-stronger. She returnsss and brings-ss her power with her. You –” The gargoyle lifts one foot, the same previously used to scratch itself, and points it at him. The foot is bony as is the leg, and the skin is black and shiny, like very old leather. The claws on the end of the foot are a dirty brown and look sharp but Sanuse pays no attention. His temper rises and he stands hurriedly, pointing back at the gargoyle.

“No. No! No!” His voice rises to match his temper. “I sent her away! She could not have survived the trek and even if she did, she could not possibly – possibly…” His voice fades away.

The gargoyle is now on all fours and it grows until the surface of the table is completely obscured. The candle is knocked over and falls to the floor, extinguished. Sanuse looks from it to the creature and back again.

Still on all fours and as big as a dog, the gargoyle snarls. “You are a fool. You. Are. A. Fool.” The words are punctuated with snarls and growls, as if the creature is fast losing the power of speech. “You are a fool and the woman returns-ss and she is...iss…not alone. You will ss-serve her or kill her and –” A cloud of black smoke envelopes the creature and it disappears.

Its final words hang in the air. You will serve her or you will kill her and – And what? And what? Sanuse is frantic, hurriedly putting on his robes, wincing as his back cracks and oozes. No time for that now. He picks up the candle and ignites it, straightens the cloth and then kneels again before the table. He must bring the creature back.

Oh no. He is still clothed. He tears off his robes, why then did he put them on? He does not know and he shakes his head in annoyance. In his haste he bumps into the table and the bowl is knocked over. He clicks his tongue and picks it up. There is no water in it and none on the floor. This gives him pause and he freezes mid-movement. Where did the water

go? Is this part of the ritual? He casts his mind back and he recalls that when he spied on her, Wisest did not summon a creature; she spoke into her bowl or perhaps to the candle, or perhaps the cloth with symbols on it, he thinks now, mumbling words he could not hear. Afterward he watched her carry the bowl into the other room, her kitchen, and he knows that it was not empty. What is this then? Where did the water go?

He straightens with the bowl in hand and now his movements are slower. To refill the bowl and start over? Or should he leave it for today? He is naked already, after all. He can do it without the water since he is obviously the more powerful. Did the Ancients in their wisdom not materialise a minion just for him, ugly thing though it was? He kneels before the table again, letting the bowl drop to the floor. He closes his eyes and visualises the man once more.

The image rises. Yes. Yes. The man is in silhouette this time, none of the detail that Sanuse needs is visible. The shoulders are broad, the waist narrow, but that is all he can make of the shadowed figure. His manhood remains unmoved and he opens his eyes again, frustrated.

No matter. He has heard what he needs to hear, it will not do to push the Ancients further than they are willing to go. Lesser healers have died for this, he thinks, and smiles to himself. No. He will not summon again. He will trust that he has heard what is necessary. The smile widens. The girl lives, does she? Ah. Then the Ancients have chosen him to battle her, and he will win. He must win. He will be the greatest in the land and none shall thwart him.

He folds the square of white and puts it in the bowl. He picks up the candle and lays it on the cloth and then after picking up his robes from the floor he shrugs them on. His back is burning. When everything is returned to its place – the bowl and its contents are back in the cupboard behind the door with his other paraphernalia – he walks across the room and opens the door. Outside, the sky is turning pink. Daybreak. He stretches and then quickly breaks the stretch when he feels his back crack and wetness ooze from the cracks. He curls one arm to the opposite shoulder to touch the cracking skin under the loose-fitting robes. Gently. Gently. When he looks at his fingers they are stained yellow and the yellow tinged with blood.

Yes. Yes! He is growing ever more yellow and he smiles, this time in pure delight. More of the colour of magic, then. Yes, he is on the right track. He must plan for the girl. But first, a bath. The water will ease the itching. He pulls the door of the hut closed and crosses the yard to his house. He pushes open the door and enters, still smiling. It was a good night of

working magic in the medicine hut, and the day will be better still. He will go back later and cast for the whereabouts of the girl. He has not done it before because he did not think to, he was sure she would not survive. Now that the Ancients have revealed her intention to return – the creature said she found her power and returns with it – he must get ready. Sonto is a mere child in comparison to his years and after all, she was never trained. He smiles and closes the door.

PART TWO

Chapter 17

Sonto

Many times I have begun this work and many times I have put it away forgotten, hidden away beneath my other scribblings, beneath the piles of notebooks – barely used – that I cannot bear to throw out for the secrets hidden in those pages. I could tear out those damning pages and destroy them but that would destroy the binding of these cheap notebooks and I can't bear to do that, at least not yet. Those were cheap notebooks but the ones that carry this story – these are different. Always top-tier, handcrafted and leather-bound models of quality craftsmanship as befits a woman of Wester. I hid those perfectly made exquisite notebooks beneath the cheaper ones during those times when I could not face the fact of an unfinished work.

There were many times when I was too afraid of what I would find beneath the legends and tales as I unravelled the stories from the histories and untangled the myths and fables from the stories and songs that had come down to us voice-to-ear, generation to generation. That was the way of my people. They did not inscribe murals on cave walls or on the insides of tombs, they made ordinary people Secret-keepers and History-tellers and charged them with keeping the living stories alive, always growing and ever-changing like the people themselves. The histories of my people are not a dead thing, a static thing of dust and bones, our histories live in song and dance and poetry and in story, and it has been the work of my life to collect them and yes, strip them of life by putting them on paper in order that they might not be completely lost. We do not tell the stories or recite the poetry any longer and if the voices will not preserve the truths, then paper must.

I know that what must be must come, and that there is no avoiding that which is. It is a funny thing that I can look back upon the days when I was reluctant to tell my story and the stories that led to my story, and compare those days of reluctance to my present eagerness to have that work complete.

I knew, even if no one else did, that something I did not want to face lay at the bottom of my reluctance to do that which I had to do. It was a thing that stilled my hand whenever I moved to cast this story in ink on paper. I knew that the unlocking would hurt because I remembered, wincing, what I had given and what had been taken from me in exchange for the truths, and I did not want to relive any of it. The trouble was, I could not avoid the telling forever. The truth would not remain untold. The time came when that which stopped me

became as chaff in the wind, scattering in the face of the immovable, inexorable that-which-must-be.

It was fear. Fear stopped me telling this story when there was still a great chance that it would make a difference. I let the lies grow unchecked, never opposing the versions of history that came from The Office of His Excellency and his various ministries, even though I knew better. I thought others would speak up, I thought others would write the truth and speak it. I was wrong. For my miscalculation I have suffered and begged forgiveness from the Ancients; I live every day with the heavy burden of what could have been. There is a saying in Wester: "we are never told what might have been," and I try, when the guilt weighs heavy on my shoulders, to remember that no one knows – not really – what would have been if I had told this story sooner. I take comfort in the knowledge that when all is said and done, that which must be will always be. Always.

The question remains, however: why did I wait so long? The answer is as I have given it: fear. Fear made me ignore the call to remember despite the pain. Fear stilled my hand until one day someone asked – but why didn't they do anything? Those people who knew what was happening? Like your father, and others like him who had a certain degree of influence, however small, the ones who knew the truth, why did they do nothing?

It was a question that I had heard before, it is a question I hear often now: why did they do nothing? I picked up my pen again and began writing when I understood that one day that question would be asked about me: why did I do nothing? I tell this story so that when asked why I did nothing, I may respond that I did something, I told the truth.

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They did nothing because they could do nothing.

That is the answer we are taught to give when asked about the war that united Wester and Yster in an uneasy marriage that fast became a farce of catastrophic proportions. If fear is my reason for holding silence like a shield all these years then an even greater fear accounts for my desire to now have the story told and done. I am afraid that if I do not do this there will never exist a record of all that happened to me and to those to whom I belong, who belong to me.

They call me Umhambuma, the One Who Roams, the Wanderer.

They call me Uzulane, the Nomad.

They call me many names that are not my own because they fear to use my given name.

The ones in the North say my name is blasphemy, that by naming myself – as if I did – Daughter of the Sun, I claim a proximity to heaven that none may attain. Monday and his wife – my parents who named me Sonto – are not here to answer for this. I ignore the ravings of the Northers and I do not let their lies stop my work. Not anymore.

In the South and in the West among those who count my gods as their gods and count my people as their own – in the West and in the South they say kuyazila ukubiza umuntu omdala ngebizo, warning each other that to speak a name is to invoke its power or worse, to draw the attention of the one called by it. They too call me Uzulane, Umhambuma. They are my people but they fear me, fear what they have been told about me. I write this that they might know my name once more.

It is only in the East, eNjelele, in that land where I learned the magic of power that make the people of the North hate me and my own people fear me – it is only in the East that they call me by my name.

They call me Sonto, Daughter of the Sun. She who is like water and like stone.

Chapter 18

Sonto

We emerged from the mountains as dusk was falling, and for the first time in a very long time we had meat for our meal that evening. Ras brought down a pheasant-like bird with his sling and although it was unseasoned, it was delicious roasted over the campfire and accompanied by the flatbread we brought with us from Sinyoka, and water from the stream that we had followed out of the mountain. Our conversation that night was sparse. My thoughts were on what awaited us the next day, when our journey would be at an end and we would be at Njelele. I can only imagine that Ras's thoughts ran in the same grooves mine did but since neither of us was eager to talk, he even more reluctant than me, there was nothing for it but to wait and see what the morning would bring. For the first time since we left Sinyoka we did not sleep curled into one another. After the meal was eaten Ras announced his desire for a walk and, assuring me I would be safe, he walked from the camp. I was exhausted and fell asleep before his return and it wasn't until I awoke the next morning that I noticed he had slept on the other side of the fire that he was now feeding with twigs. We breakfasted on left-over bird with barely a word exchanged. The silence, although unusual between us, felt comfortable. I did not mind it. I had a lot on my mind.

After breakfast we hefted our satchels onto our shoulders and began walking. The land sloped downward from the mountains behind us, the vegetation thick, lush and green, although the trees were not very tall, more bushes than tree. The path was narrow, not wide enough for us to walk abreast, so I followed behind the Yster man looking this way and that, although the vegetation was so thick that there was nothing much to see. It was like walking in a tunnel of varying shades of green, and every now and then I spotted a flowering bush or two, though nothing I recognized. The air was muggy and thick, and strange odours assailed my nose. I had bent to sniff several kinds of flowers as we passed them, but the odours were unfamiliar and pungent, and I stopped doing that. Birds wheeled beneath a seemingly overcast sky – another strange thing. The clouds hung low, grey, and heavy, but the air was decidedly warm, almost uncomfortably so despite what looked to me like a winter sky. This – the thick vegetation, the grey sky that brought no cold – was nothing like the wide open lands of my home, where even in the densest bush one could see for miles around because the grass never grew very tall and the trees were few and far between; where the sky was always a brilliant blue in high summer, and grey with rain and cold in low summer. I felt a pang of

homesickness then, and swallowed several times to dislodge the lump in my throat, blinking away the tears that prickled unexpectedly. I focused on keeping up with the man who strode ahead of me.

I thought about what Njelele held for me. Ras had been oddly recalcitrant when I asked, telling me only that Njelele would be what it would be, that there was no point in trying to predict or prepare for anything and therefore no point in discussing what I might or might not find there. Frustrating, to say the least. All I knew was that it was a place of strong magic, and that I would know almost immediately upon arrival if I was welcome there or not. This had given me much to think about. Why would I not be welcome there when everything, events in Ekuthuleni and Sinyoka, had convinced not just me but Sanuse, Nona and even Ras himself that this was a necessary journey? Had Wundlu himself not shown up to confirm the same? However, the man I travelled with was unwilling to tell me anything so I followed his lead and stopped asking questions. We walked on in silence.

We stopped for rest and water from the stream that gurgled parallel to our path. We finished up the last of the bird-meat and polished off the flatbread that we had left Sinyoka with. It was amazing how well it kept. I wanted to say something about that to Ras but he was still barely communicative, giving me only curt nods or brief shakes of the head in response to questions and ignoring statements. I chose to keep silence. I wanted to ask how much further we had to go but eventually decided against it. He made no mention of replenishing our food supply which surely meant we were nearing our destination. We would get there when we got there.

I could not get used to the heavy heat. Where I came from clamminess like this almost always heralded a thunderstorm, but despite the overcast sky, no rain fell. My clothing stuck to my body and my skin was slick from the light film of moisture that coated it; there was not even the slightest breeze to make the mugginess bearable. I wondered if I would ever get used to feeling like the air was too thick to breathe. I wanted to complain but since my companion was not in a chatty mood, I held my tongue. We trudged on.

The sun was just shy of midday and I was beginning to tire when the verdant vegetation began to thin. The stream had curved away from the path at some point, and now we were going uphill again, up the side of a low hill-like feature covered with broad-leafed runner plants of a type that I had never seen before. The air was less thick once we emerged from the forest, but still heavy and humid. I looked around now that we were in the open air, but there was not much to see. Behind us, the mountains loomed dark and forbidding, the

forested foothills we had just emerged from no more inviting than the mountains themselves. Ahead, the low hills with their covering of runners and the small purple and yellow flowers that bloomed amid the dark green leaves, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was obvious that our path led over the hill before us. I was eager to see more of this strange land.

The sight that met my gaze as we crested the low hill – a dune, in fact, one of many that lay along this coast – took my breath away. The blue-grey expanse seemed almost silken, undulating and swelling beneath the heavy sky. I did not know that ulwandle could leave one breathless. I will never forget my very first sighting of it. We stood atop the dune, the Yster man and I, staring. For a moment the sun broke through the clouds and very briefly we shaded our eyes as bright sunlight turned the thing I had never seen outside of pictures and film, ulwandle, into a sparkling blue-green splendour of gently rolling waves, as if the sky and the sea were giving us a hint of what they could be. I felt dwarfed by the magnificence I beheld, overwhelmed by the immense power that must be contained within that vastness. I could not wrap my head around it. I turned to Ras and found him watching me, a smile playing about his lips.

"What do you think?" he asked, his smile widening. "I know this is your first time seeing it, and I well recall how my first sight of the Mother stilled my heart."

It was several moments before I responded. Thinking back upon that moment now I wonder – what can one say about the Mother? That she is big? Gigantic? Ginormous? Earth-covering? Powerful? That she is beautiful? That she is magnificent? There are simply no words that can do her justice; to try is to fail. The dune we were on sloped down to a pure white beach, devoid of any covering. Beyond the beach, the waves gently lapped at the shore, blue-green ripples flecked with white foam that kissed the beach gently, softly, nothing like the crashing, roaring waves that films I'd seen had led me to expect, but still far from quiet. Is it any easier to describe the sound of the ocean? If it was not crashing and roaring, what was it, then? I think of it as the sound of all life, all consciousness, and all power. To hear it is to recognize it as is exactly, but to try and describe it? – that is too much like trying to describe Divinity, or Holiness, and I for one am not fool enough to try. Standing atop that dune, watching the ocean swell and undulate in magnificent grandeur was almost mesmerizing. A feeling of calm washed over me and I sighed.

"I knew it was big, but this is…magnificent, Ras." I turned to him, knowing that what I said was only inadequately conveying my meaning. "I know the ocean is huge, I know that, of course, I've seen pictures, you know, films and all that, but none of those things captured

this…this…" I fell into silence, turning my gaze once more to the restless expanse that stretched to the horizon. The white beach stretched away in both directions but to the right I could see buildings of some sort. I squinted but I could not make out any details, nor was there any sign of movement.

"Is that…?" I faltered. It was obvious that we would be heading towards those buildings, there was nothing else anywhere that I could see.

"All of this is Njelele," Ras said, taking my hand and looking into my eyes. "You made it." His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at me, a gentle smile that spoke of warmth, tenderness, and something else I could not discern. Relief?

"We made it," I replied, smiling back at him.

He hugged me then, holding me close and whispering into my ear.

"You made it. This place is special, Sonto. I was so worried."

"Worried? Why?" I pulled away so that I could see his face. "Worried about what?"

"Njelele is…protected. I told you that already. If you were not meant to be here, you would not be. You would have…died." He sighed and hugged me again, then taking my hand, led me down the dune and towards the beach.

"What do you mean, died? Died how?"

He didn't answer and I let it pass. I knew enough about him by now that I knew he could not be drawn into a line of conversation he did not want. We scrambled rather than walked down the dune, awkwardly because he had still not let go of my hand, and I had not tried to pull free. At the base of the dune Ras stopped to pull off his sandals, and encouraged me to do the same.

"The sand is soft and warm, and we must greet the Mother."

"Is it safe?" I asked, pulling off my own sandals and stuffing them into my satchel. I had heard and read all sorts of things about the ocean, after all. Jellyfish, for one. I knew about jellyfish. I'd read that their stings could be agonizing and I did not want to find out if everything I thought I knew was true.

"Yes, she's safe. And she is not an it. The Mother is a she, Sonto. Never refer to her as it."

"But it's the ocean –"

"She." He led me to the water's edge. "She is our Mother and she is not an it. That is all. I know that others call her it, but you must not and especially in this place you will not. Alright?" His tone brooked no argument.

I nodded, feeling like a small child chided into good behaviour.

The water was warm, shower warm which I had not expected, and I said as much to Ras.

"Yes, she's warm here. Very warm. This is a special place. On the western coast beyond your home and beyond the desert she is cold, and to the south there too she is cold, very cold, but here, warm."

I could have asked why but I did not really care. I knew enough about Geography to know the answer had to do with currents and such things and to be frank, I did not need to know the details. Besides, the answer could just as easily have been "magic" – and what could I have said to that?

Ras stopped when the water reached above our knees and let go of my hand. He stooped, scooped a double handful of the warm water and without warning, wet my head. Although the water was warm I did not expect it, and I gasped in surprise. I bent to return the favour but he stopped me.

"No, Sonto, wait!"

I stood still, the note of urgency in his voice catching my attention.

"We first greet the Mother, introduce ourselves."

He poured more water over me, mumbling words I could not hear. It felt like a prayer. I waited, shifting my weight as the sand shifted beneath my soles with the ebb and flow of the water. I could feel the current, a slight pull, easy to resist. When his prayer over me was done, Ras repeated the process, pouring water over himself and praying. His prayer for himself was much shorter and when he was finished, he smiled at me, water dripping from his hair and beard. Desire bloomed between my legs, surprising me with its intensity.

"The time to play in the water will come but it is not now." He pulled me into yet another embrace and then right there in the water, he kissed me. I wanted to relax into his arms but I could not, I needed to concentrate on keeping my balance. He pulled away from the kiss, and smiled.

I felt my hair releasing itself from its braids and I closed my eyes, enjoying the slight tingling over my scalp. If I had had any doubts about the magical nature of this place, they were now dispelled. I opened my eyes.

"Your eyes are doing that thing again," Ras said, still smiling. "You're irresistible." Another kiss. I felt my desire for him grow, but he released me and turned towards the beach.

"Come."

I followed.

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My heart thumped in my chest as the tall woman and even taller man walked towards us. I gripped Ras's hand in my own and he gave mine a gentle squeeze which I returned. As they drew closer, I realized that the woman was beautiful. Stunningly so. Preternaturally, even. It was difficult not to gape. She had darker skin than I had ever seen. It shone with a blue-black sheen, seeming to swallow the bright sunlight that had emerged from the clouds and now flooded the beach, reflecting it in a soft silvery glow that was most evident on her high forehead and cheekbones.

Her cheekbones were high and angular, her chin sharp, and her dark eyes when they met mine were soft and friendly. I was uneasy but I sensed no ill-will from her or the man beside her who, when my gaze turned to him, smiled warmly, though he remained silent, as she did. He too was dark-skinned, and his skin reflected the same silvery glow as the woman's, like full moonlight on a dark night. His features were more commonplace; I did not find in him the transcendental beauty that I saw in her. Unlike the woman whose hair was worn loose and reached to the sky in defiance of gravity, his was twisted into numerous thick braids that fell below his shoulders. His hair was styled like Ras' but instead of double-strands, his was in triple strands, a style of braid worn only by women in Ekuthuleni and Sinyoka. Both wore soft-looking leather tunics and leather sandals; there seemed to be no gender differentiation in their clothing. Their wrists and necks were decorated with braided leather, little white shells and coloured beads woven into it. I had never seen people so tall. They both stood head and shoulders – perhaps more – above Ras and myself, and I wondered, briefly, if they were fully human. I chided myself for being ridiculous. Ras dropped my hand to hug the woman, and then the man, but not a word was exchanged until they all three turned to me.

"Welcome," the woman said, and stepping towards me she enfolded me in a hug. She spoke Wester without a trace of an accent, which surprised me. Her body was firm as she held me close for the briefest moment. I did not return the gesture, surprise stilling my limbs. When she released me and stepped back, the man hugged me in his turn and then he too stepped back.

"This is Sonto," Ras said. "I have introduced her to the Mother. We have only just arrived."

"Welcome, Sonto," the man and woman said in unison.

I got the sense that they were waiting for something so I smiled, cleared my throat, and thanked them for the welcome.

An awkward silence fell, which the man broke.

"We saw you greet the Mother and came to meet you. Ras Eliyahu, it has been a time and times since you have visited us. Are you well?"

Before Ras could answer, the woman spoke again. It was impossible to tell from their speech if they were truly Wester, Yster, or something else altogether.

"You are welcome here," she said. "Indeed, one such as you," she nodded in my direction, "has been expected for some time. It is good that you have arrived safely."

The man beside her nodded his agreement.

Expected? What did that mean? I smiled and said nothing, I felt too shy to ask questions.

"Come," said the woman. "You must eat and rest, and then we shall talk, and then we shall see." So saying, she took my satchel from me, while the man took Ras's.

"I am Thuli, daughter of Dust; this is my partner and Chief Healer, Dwala, son of Rock. You are Sonto, child of the Sun, travelling with Ras Eliyahu the guardian, and you are truly welcome here."

It was the third time she spoke of welcome. I found it strange but I accepted that there would be many customs unfamiliar to me in this new place. I noted the honorific given to Ras but did not question it. I would ask my questions later.

We walked in silence, heading toward the white buildings I had seen from the top of the dune. As we got closer I saw that there were three squat buildings laid out in a U-shape, all of them white, set high and back from the beach against a rock outcropping, a cliff face one might say, although it was neither very high nor very steep. The buildings were low and flat-roofed, facing the open side of the "U", a courtyard whose limits were marked by a low, wide stone wall, also white-washed, atop which sat dozens of flowerpots in different shapes and sizes, all of them white just like the buildings, bearing different kinds of plants in a wild riot of colour that made a startling contrast with the white pots and walls. Some of the plants bore strange-looking flowers while others displayed variegated leaves in colours I had never seen before. If I had thought the lush forest at the base of the mountain exotic, these flowerpots – or rather the plants in them – were even more so. As we passed into the courtyard I noted the spiky leaves of intelezi in several of the pots, but nothing else looked familiar. The courtyard was smooth-paved, and intricate designs had been painted onto the

paving. I could see flowers, animals, and even human figures, but I had no time to examine it as we were led into the structure on the right.

The woman, Thuli, led us to the right-hand building, but Dwala turned to the left, waving as he went.

"He'll join us soon enough," Thuli said, pushing open the heavy door.

The interior was cool, a welcome contrast to the heavy humidity outside. The room we entered was large and round, with small windows set into the three outer walls. I was surprised by the circular interior since from the outside the building was a square. The floor was concrete much like we had in Ekuthuleni, but unlike my home where the concrete was red or black and more often than not, highly polished and covered with rugs and carpets to protect from the chill, this floor was unpolished though clean and bare, with the exception of a small reed-mat just inside the door.

As she crossed the threshold, Thuli removed her sandals and left them behind the door, and wiped her feet on the reed-mat, gesturing for Ras and me to do the same. We wiped our still-bare feet, and followed her into the circular room. She led us to where a selection of chairs and sofas had been placed around a long, low wooden table and, lowering herself onto a low two-seater, patted the seat next to her.

"You sit with me, Sonto. Ras has his favourite. You can pick yours later but for now, be with me."

I sat, feeling cornered by Thuli. The settee was comfortable however, and I soon relaxed, adjusting the loose cushions more comfortably behind my back. The walk to the beach and then to this place had not been a long one, but the days of walking from Sinyoka had taken their toll, and it felt good to rest my body on something other than bare ground or rock.

I looked around the room, trying not to make my curiosity obvious. The tapestry-covered walls, the framed pictures on dressers, the greenery in a clear vase on the low table before us, even the mat on the floor, all contributed to the sudden wave of homesickness that washed over me, making me miss home in a way I had not before. I resisted the memories that threatened to overwhelm and swallowed hard. Despite these efforts my eyes prickled with the burn of tears. I could not – I would not – cry. Not now, not here. I jumped at the feel of a warm hand covering mine where it lay on the settee.

"Child. You have seen much and your journey has been long. It is acceptable here to be true to yourself. You need not hide your tears," Thuli said, softly.

She moved closer and put an arm around my shoulders. I felt my body tense, and hoped she would not try to draw me closer. Other than Ras's hugs and our lovemaking I had not been touched by another human since I left Ekuthuleni. Months ago? I should have been counting the days, perhaps, but I had lost track of how much time had passed since Sanuse exhorted me to leave Ekuthuleni. I took a deep breath, opened my mouth to assure Thuli that I was fine, and instead dissolved into uncontrollable sobs.

***

"Sonto. Sonto, wake up. You must wake."

I knew this voice. It was familiar, rich, a voice I knew belonged to one who cared for me. I kept my eyes closed. I was warm, cocooned in softness, I had no desire to respond. Whoever called my name would go away soon enough, surely.

I was in a beautiful forest glade, warm sunlight filtering through a canopy of green as I walked about picking a flower here, stopping to hug a tree there. Birdsong trilled from somewhere high above. Butterflies flitted back and forth. Soft, warm earth covered in springy grass underfoot. It was…surreal…and I had no intention of leaving this lovely place. No, I did not care who called my name, I would not leave.

"Sonto."

The voice again. I knew it; I ignored it.

"Sonto, vuka."

The dream dissolved and reluctantly I opened my eyes to stare into Ras's concerned ones.

"You must wake up." He shook my shoulder gently. "Sonto, you must wake up," he said again.

Confusion. I looked past him and saw only white-washed walls and a tapestry or two. Wake up? When had I fallen asleep? I sat up abruptly, barely noticing the soft wool covering that slid from around my shoulders. I was still on the settee, the red one I had been sitting on with Thuli. I remembered that. What I did not remember was how I came to be lying on it.

I swung my legs onto the cool floor and straightened on the seat, putting a hand to my head.

"What happened?" I asked Ras. My head felt heavy, and I could feel that my eyes were swollen. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened, Sonto. You're just tired and the crying must have worn you out."

And then I remembered. Thuli sitting next to me. The concern on her face. The uncontrollable urge to cry.

"Did I cry myself to sleep?" The words felt ridiculous even as I spoke them.

"Well," Ras began, his lips curving, "You sort of did. But Thuli gave you something, too. You were almost hysterical."

"What?"

"You just started crying, sobbing – weeping, really. It makes sense I suppose. Thuli and Dwala told me what happened and, well, I understand. Anyway, you started fighting Thuli saying you had to help Monday – was that your mother's name? –nd that's when –"

"Monday is – was – my father," I interrupted. Nothing made sense but I tried to work it out anyway. I remembered fighting back tears, but I did not remember being hysterical. "What did Thuli tell you?"

"Well, you told me your parents were killed by the Yster but I already knew that, but you never told me how and…" He lapsed into silence for a moment, "And I'm sorry, Sonto. I'm sorry for what happened. I'm sorry I pushed you so hard on the way here. I'm…sorry."

His voice broke and I stared at him, speechless.

Thuli came in at that moment, carrying a tray that she put down on the low table in front of the settee. On the tray was a glass of water, a plate of uphuthu and amasi, and a bowl filled with small, bright red fruit. Umthunduluka. This was the fruit of my home, the wild plums that, if allowed to sun-ripen on the bush were tangy and juicy, but sour if picked too soon. At the sight of the fruit I felt the tears well up again and brought a hand to my eyes in an attempt to stem the flow, hoping Ras and Thuli would think I was rubbing away sleep.

"How do you feel?" the tall woman asked. She sat down next to me and Ras got up from where he had been kneeling, and headed towards a door at the other end of the room.

I had not noticed before but there were two doors leading out of the room we sat in, the lounge. One door was directly in front of me, and that's the one Ras went through. I could see cupboards and the corner of a table, like a kitchen. The other door was in the wall to the left and it was closed, but from the configuration of the buildings I had seen as we walked into the compound, I knew it led into the building next door, the centre of the "U". So the buildings were connected, then. I looked around to see if I'd missed anything else.

Ras returned with an identical tray to the one before me, set it down on his side of the table, and then straightened. "Do you want to wash your hands and face first?"

I nodded, but first I turned to Thuli.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what came over me. I hope I did not trouble you." I was embarrassed by what had happened.

"Oh, Sonto," she said, smiling. "You are here, and we shall trouble each other a whole lot more before we are done. I told you that here you are to be true to yourself. You need not apologize." She smiled, and I smiled back. "Dwala was here earlier, while you slept. You must go to him when you have eaten. He must see to you before you retire for the night, but there is no need to worry." She paused. "Now, go with Ras and when you come back I will answer all your questions."

Ras led me to the kitchen, where I was surprised to see a porcelain sink complemented by two bronze taps, against one wall. Like the lounge the kitchen had white walls but unlike the lounge there was nothing on the walls except a simple round clock, the tick of which seemed overly loud. It was 5.46pm. I was again surprised when Ras opened one of the bronze taps and let it run for a moment before gesturing for me to wash. The water was warm and quickly grew hot. I washed my hands at the sink. A sink, a geyser somewhere, cheery yellow curtains at the window, a small pot plant at the centre of the big kitchen table – it all looked normal and modern. Surprisingly modern. I do not know why, perhaps it was the dilapidated buildings of Sinyoka, or perhaps a prejudice I did not know I held, but I had expected Njelele to be, well, primitive. Rural.

"I'd like to wash my face and, you know…" I found I could not tell Ras that my bladder was demanding attention. Despite the time we had spent together I was suddenly shy to speak to him of such things. It had been different in the bush. We were different in the bush. This was civilization and one simply did not say "I need to pee" while standing in the middle of the kitchen.

"Oh, of course," he said, a little flustered. "I should have shown you as soon as we arrived. Come, this way." Turning, he led the way through the lounge to the other door I had seen. I don't know what I expected, but certainly not what I found. Ras opened the door and gestured for me to enter ahead of him. I found myself in a pure white bathroom, beautifully appointed and spotlessly clean. I turned to exclaim but Ras had not entered with me, and the door clicked shut.

There was a key in the lock and I turned it for no other reason than that it was there. I noticed another door in the opposite wall. I walked over to open it and then hesitated, unsure of what I might find on the other side. I decided not to find out, turned the key in that lock too, and, finally, sat on the porcelain toilet, still looking around. I had never seen such an

exquisite bathroom. Certainly nothing like this had existed in Ekuthuleni and I doubted Sinyoka would have had anything that compared. It was starkly decorated in that there were no ornaments anywhere, but it was beautiful nonetheless. The walls were mirrored from waist height to ceiling, all of them, and below the mirrors there were no cupboards or sinks in the way, the walls were covered in pure white ceramic tile. On the white countertop sat a bar of green soap in a white soap dish, and nothing else. I flushed the toilet (white and stain-free) and rinsed my hands at the sink.

I opened white cupboards and found white towels and rolls of white toilet paper. I crossed the room and examined the shower. It poured into a large oval basin (also white), so wide that there was little possibility of wetting the floor regardless of how wide the bronze taps were opened. Next to it stood a white dresser that would hold cosmetics and other bath paraphernalia, but for now it stood empty and pristine.

Having examined the room, I examined myself in the many mirrors. I chose the one above the sink, leaned on the counter and stared into my own face. My hair was untidy, still loose from when it had unbraided itself earlier. My time asleep had left it in tangled disarray. My face was streaked with dried tears, and my eyes seemed too big for my face, pink-rimmed and very slightly swollen. I jumped when a knock came on the door leading to the lounge.

"Ye-es?" I called hesitantly. Had I been in here too long?

"Sonto?" Thuli's voice came through the door. "I'm sorry, I should have thought of this earlier. I'm leaving clothing out here if you want to bath and change. Take your time, I'll cover your food." Then silence.

"Thank you," I called back, but I had no way of knowing if she heard.

I stood for a moment. If I opened the door to get the clothing would I have to say something? Would it be rude not to? The idea of clean clothing and a shower – a warm shower even! – was compelling. I opened the door, quickly grabbed the bundle of clothing from the floor and closed the door, turning the key once more.

That glorious first shower brought me back to myself, the warm water made me feel whole again. I had even washed my hair, and stepped out of the shower into the darkening room I could not find any light switches, so I hurried now, putting my strands into igoda down the middle of my head. The clothing Thuli had left turned out to be a simple tunic in very soft, supple, cowhide. I fingered the leather. I was reminded of the fact that clothing was one area of leather working that had been lost to Ekuthuleni, despite the Wester reputation for excellent leather-work.

I folded my stained clothing and left it in the cupboard under the sink. I would return for it later, when I knew what Thuli had done with my satchel. I did not want to walk into the lounge with dirty clothing. With one final look into the mirrors and around the room – everything was exactly as I found it, except that now there was a wet (but rinsed clean) towel on the rail – I opened the door and stepped out of the bathroom. I immediately detoured into the kitchen because I felt awkward, and ran water at the kitchen sink for absolutely no reason. When I realized what I was doing, I switched the tap off and headed into the lounge, joining Thuli on the settee once more.

"Thank you, Thuli. I feel a lot better now. Your bathroom is really pretty," I said, breaking the silence and smiling shyly at the other woman.

"Oh, that's for your use, for you and Ras. My bathroom is on the other side but I'll show you everything tomorrow." She leaned forward and uncovered the plate that still sat on the tray. "You must eat now, child."

She handed me the plate and a spoon and leaning back, began to talk to Ras. I appreciated the withdrawal of her attention and glanced at Ras who smiled, gesturing towards his emptied plate.

"Yes, Sonto, eat. I know how little you've eaten the past few days and –"

"Ras. Leave her be," Thuli interrupted him, patting my knee but not looking at me. "You tell me Ras, did anything happen on your way here?"

I wondered if Ras would mention the hut and immediately wished I hadn't because the images of what we had done there flooded back. I caught his eye and then looked down at my plate and concentrated on eating. If he was going to tell, there was nothing I could do about it. He did not mention the nature of our relationship however, and I soon stopped paying attention to their conversation and focused on the food. I had never had amasi creamier than I now had before me. Uphuthu was perfectly made, not a hint of raw meal anywhere. The water was refreshingly cold and umthunduluka – oh my, I had never tasted anything juicier or tangier. That bowl of fruit was the perfect finish to what is – to this day – one of the best meals I've ever had.

I took my tray to the kitchen and returned for Ras'. Back in the kitchen I quickly rinsed the utensils, left them on the draining board and went back into the lounge. Thuli had lit lamps and candles, filling the room with flickering shadows. They had hot water here but no electric light so the geyser must be solar-powered. I had seen no fridge, at least not in the kitchen, and there was neither radio nor television in the lounge. Now what?

Now was Thuli, turning to me with a serious aspect to her breathtakingly beautiful face.

"Sonto. You are welcome here." She cupped her hands and clapped them together thrice, making a hollow sound that echoed through the room. Turning to Ras, she repeated herself, and again clapped her cupped hands together.

Ras clapped thrice in his turn intoning, "Thuli, we thank you for your welcome."

They both turned to me and at Ras' nod, I did as he had done.

"Thuli, thank you for your welcome." I cupped and clapped my hands three times.

"Right," Thuli said. She shifted in her seat, sighed, and settled against the backrest, drawing my hand into hers and looking into my face. "Sonto, I gave you a draught earlier. That hysteria was a result of everything you have been through but with rest and counsel you should not experience it again. You've slept much of the medicine off but no doubt you will sleep deeply tonight, and you must speak with Dwala before you take your rest. I say "you must" but what I mean is, that is my preference. You may decline and see him in the morning. So. Will you come?"

She waited. I stared at her, wondering again about her blue-black skin, her ethereal beauty; wondering where she was from, who she was, what this place was, all in the space of a breath or two. Then I looked at Ras. His face was impassive.

"I will see Dwala now," I said. Might as well.

Chapter 19

Sonto

My memories of Njelele are sometimes as vivid as my recollection of this morning's breakfast but at other times there is nothing but swirling mist no matter how hard I reach back for details, for memory and remembrance to fill in the gaps. Perhaps none of my memories of that time is truly mine. Perhaps the snippets of memory and the fragmented recollections I possess are nothing more than a melding together of Ras's repeated retelling of our time there, a faulty montage that I have absorbed and made my own.

Dwala taught me much of what I know now about magic and power and being-ness, yet I recall very little of time spent with him outside of those lessons. I remember him as a very tall and beautiful man, I remember his quiet, powerful energy that grounded me as he taught me the things I need to learn. Outside of that, only that he was there on the outskirts of the life we lived eNjelele. Thuli who was Dwala's sister but not – we will come to that – was unfailingly graceful. She managed the domestic aspects of the compound, prepared our meals, and told me stories – histories, to be more accurate. She – with Dwala – had been a guardian of Njelele so long that they could not count the years, or so they claimed. And then there was Ras. Ras who walked with me and talked with me and loved with me, Ras who would not answer when I asked why Thuli and Dwala called him a guardian. Ras was there for all of it.

On my first evening eNjelele Thuli convinced me to see Dwala before retiring for the night. She and Ras walked with me across the courtyard to Dwala's door. The sun had set by then and although there was some light left, the sky was darkening rapidly. I could hear the ocean, an unceasing roar that was comforting in its rhythm and yet somewhat unsettling in its unfamiliarity. I felt as though that unceasing murmur reached for me and sought to draw me close, to pull me across the sand and into the deep. It seemed as if the very waves sighed my name onto the sand over and over, calling me. I shuddered and made up my mind to ask Ras if he too heard his own name in the waves that broke onto the shore. We stopped in front of the door at the end. We had passed one other door that was closed and I had noticed Thuli glance at it. That must be her room. Its window was tightly shut and no light came through the pale-coloured curtain.

After indicating that I should remove the soft slippers I wore and knocking twice on the door at the end, Thuli folded her arms across her chest and stood in silence, watching me.

I watched her back, a little affronted that she wasn't saying anything. I glanced at Ras but he was looking out over the ocean, although it had become too dark to see anything except bright stars in a moonless sky. Thuli should have been telling me what to expect, what not to do, but all she did was watch me from her great height, her features set in perfect stillness, her dark skin and its silvery sheen taking on a softer cast thanks to a lamp that sat in an intricate sconce in the wall next to the door. I wondered, yet again, where she came from, what race produced such flawless features. Was she the most beautiful of her kind? Was it a family thing, since Dwala was equally fine-looking?

I brought my thoughts back to the present when I realized that Thuli was examining me from head-to-toe and making no pretence of doing otherwise. Several times I thought she would say something: her lips would part and she would take a quick, audible breath as if preparing to speak, but then she would give a little shake of her head making the silver lights in it sparkle and shimmer, and look away. A few moments would pass, and then she would resume her silent appraisal. I resisted the urge to ask her what she wanted to say.

A deep "Ngena" sounded from the other side of the door. Ras turned to me and his gaze held mine for a moment before he nodded once and turned away again, this time away from me and to the courtyard which he crossed with Thuli close behind him. A few strides and they were soon silhouetted figures briefly outlined against the light as the sitting room door opened, gone when it closed behind them.

I took a deep breath, opened the door in front of me, and walked into the smoky gloom beyond.

This room was also round on the inside, and a lot bigger than I had expected. The walls were lined with shelves of different heights, some reaching all the way up to the ceiling and others only waist-high and others even lower than that. Jars and bottles of all sizes, shapes and colours jostled for space with boxes small and big, books, and sheaves of paper. Everything came in multiple colours, even the paper. Where there were no shelves, frames of all sorts covered the walls. There was not a blank bit of wall bigger than my palm. Some of the frames held mirrors that did not reflect what they should have – although that may have been a trick of the light, and other frames held bits of paper behind the glass, as if someone had made a hobby of framing paper of all sizes and colours, all of it with even edges as if the framer had never heard of straight edges; it was too dark to tell if there was any writing.

The shelves they receded as my gaze swept over them, as if the room was expanding to keep me from examining anything too closely. On the floor here and there sat small

braziers each filled with glowing embers, and between the braziers brightly coloured rugs of a material I could not identify covered the floor. This kaleidoscope of colour and the warm ambience created by the glowing braziers took me by surprise – it was so different from the stark white of the bathroom or the gentle neutrals of the sitting room. Dwala's room, which I came to refer to as isigodlo, should have been uncomfortably hot with all those burning braziers. It was not. It was pleasantly warm with none of the heavy humidity that waited outside its confines.

In front of a central brazier that had been dug into the centre of the room sat Dwala, cross-legged, straight-backed. The Nguni braid he had worn to the beach was undone, now his hair fell in dark waves around his shoulders to his chest and down his back. My breath hitched a little as I saw his hair begin to pulse and leach colour. The dark strands turned white and then became glowing silver as I watched. For a fleeting moment our eyes met and his belied the warmth of the room and told me instead of biting coldness, sharp winds, and wild, desolate beaches. His eyes were light-coloured and like Thuli's, pupil-less, a flat grey-blue ash colour from edge to edge. For a brief, falling moment I saw myself kneeling before my mother's cold fireplace, failing to light a fire. Humiliation lanced through me, a sharp stab that jolted me back to the present and forced me to pull my eyes from Dwala's. Maybe it was the braziers that dotted the room, maybe it was the distinct chill I felt on meeting Dwala's flat gaze, or perhaps it was my need to hide from the memories that suddenly threatened to resurface, but I got lost in the riot of colour that his hair had become. Not even his eyes like gathering storm clouds on a silvering horizon and the stories I knew they wanted to tell me could keep my attention from Dwala's hair.

I could see him clearly despite the smoke that wreathed the room. It rose in clouds from the central brazier, drifting and swirling yet curling away from Dwala and rising roof-ward so that he alone sat in a smoke-free circle. Little bundles of herbs slowly turned to ash and disappeared on the glowing coals that somehow burned with none of the heat that should have made the closed, smoky room suffocating, but all I caught in the air was the scent of rain and a slight brininess. I wondered briefly how the Mother was able to make her presence known through the thick smoke but then I realized that somehow – somehow – the burning herbs made in here smell just like out there. The realization struck me that here was magic more powerful and mysterious than I could have ever imagined. The smoke was making me light-headed. I did not fight the pull I felt to sit in front of the man whose hair held my

attention. A languid heaviness suffused my limbs. I wanted nothing more than to sit here, like this.

"Hlala kuhle, Sonto." His voice came from a distance and from everywhere all at once, as if it was amplified by the smoke. If he had not been sitting right in front of me I would have said his voice came clear out of the smoke. He gestured at his own cross-legged posture.

I unfolded my legs, which I had curled to one side of my body. I felt awkward but I re-arranged my limbs and sat in what I assumed was the proper way this time, cross-legged. The tunic Thuli had given me was just long enough to pool between my legs leaving only the barest hint of knee visible. I was exactly where I needed to be, there was nothing else that needed my attention. I would ask my questions about the embers that burned without heat and the cold that chilled my bones when I met Dwala's eyes eventually, I knew this with a certainty I could not justify, but for now I would be here, and here was watching his hair. Perhaps I was supposed to say something but I could not bring myself to care.
The ocean caressed the beach in percussive ebbs and flows. I found it difficult not to be carried away by the Mother's thunderous but muted murmur; it had been playing against my skull since Ras and I emerged from the mountains earlier that day. The thought that Dwala's hair seemed to ripple and curl as if led by the sound of the ocean crossed my mind. I did not question anything.

That first night, sitting cross-legged in front of Dwala with the smoke of whatever he was burning on those strange embers coiling upward, I paid no attention to the shimmering glow that emanated from him and slowly, softly, brightened the room. His hair continued to undulate in a symphony of movement and colour that held my attention. A pearlescent sheen played through the strands as they glided and coiled over each other, a pulsing that I was sure if I listened just a bit harder, if I kept my eye on just the right ripple and followed it to its fading, I could decipher.

I watched one ripple form at his temple, a silver swell tinged teal and turquoise that cascaded into a deep navy and then empurpled as I watched, before turning summer-sky blue and then silver as the ripple travelled the length of his hair and faded to nothing at the ends that were a constant cascade of colour and rippling motion. I knew there was a message there. I knew that hair did not randomly curl and uncurl itself let alone take on the multi-dimensional hues that I observed – there had to be more to it than pretty colours and weirdly kinetic strands. If this was what Ras saw in my own hair, it was no wonder he seemed dumb-stricken every time.

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ENjelele was beautiful to me and I was content to remain there indefinitely. The air was thick thanks to the unrelenting humidity and I loved it. I loved the heaviness, it was so different from what I had known before yet I found it deeply comforting and strangely familiar. Where Ekuthuleni was dry and scorching hot in high summer with a series of rolling thunderstorms and gentle night rains in low summer, Njelele was a seaside rainforest of soft, warm drizzles interspersed with bright, shimmering days of unrelenting sunshine.

When it was not drizzling the Njelele sun blazed hot and brilliant in a clear azure sky, never giving the dampness that can make coastal living a nightmare the chance to take hold and turn into mould. The contrast between the steamy, green lushness of the forest – more verdant jungle than swamp – and the desolate sun-bleached beach never ceased to amaze me, and having the forest and the beach so close together separated only by the rolling dunes seemed to me the best of all possible worlds. Were it not for the chill in Thuli and Dwala's now ash-grey eyes I would have very quickly forgotten that there was such a thing as cold.

It was not only the immediate environs of Njelele that captured my heart, it was the compound itself. The squat buildings in their pristine whiteness and the non-existent laws of physics once you crossed thresholds, the square rooms that became round interiors bigger on the inside than they had any right to be judging by the outside – all of it was riveting mystery to be unravelled very slowly and savoured as if I had not come here to understand the perplexing immorality and sheer wickedness of an unprovoked massacre. I was in no hurry at all.

I spent my days exploring with Ras. Sometimes we explored the forest and even went into the mountains and up along the cliffs, discovering caves and revelling in the secluded bays that we found. Other times we lazed on the beach or played in the water.

I understood somewhere at the back of my mind that we were no longer in the Republic I knew, that we had entered a new and perhaps liminal space where the rules were not quite what I had always known them to be. Was I not unsettled, you might ask? No, I was not; not really. Or at least, not in the beginning, not in those early days of exploring and learning. There was so much I wanted to learn regarding eNjelele, so much that was new and different and strange that many weeks passed – although I cannot say with certainty how many – before I could even begin to contemplate why Sanuse had sent me there.

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Time was different in that place. There was enough time for everything I wanted to do. I never felt rushed or like I was missing out on anything. If I took a long shower, for example, or if I decided to sleep in one morning, I did not worry that I would have less time to do something else. There was always enough time. If there is anything I would bring back from eNjelele if I could, it would be the sufficiency of time.

It was Dwala who first explained to me how to enter into the silence.

"You are a daughter of the land, Sonto. You were born deep enkabeni yezwe and your roots are embedded in the plains, there can be no doubt about that – but you would not be here if you were not a child of the water too."

He would have gone on, as he so often did, but I was not in the mood for it.

"You and Thuli always talk in riddles, Dwala. Why can't you just tell me plainly what is next for me?" I sounded petulant but I could not help it. "I think I would know if the Mother was calling me, wouldn't I? Furthermore, you and Thuli are god-type super beings or something – you would know too. And," I held up a finger, "I swim often."

It was true. I had come to hate the water, hated how it tugged at me, always calling me deeper and further but I could not – I would not – succumb. I forced myself to swim every day so that my companions would not know my fear but oh how I hated it. "If the Mother wanted me, she would have taken me by now."

Dwala only looked at me.

Whatever the call of the Mother was and no matter what Dwala said, I wanted no part of it. I was here eNjelele because when my parents were murdered and I asked the only healer-wise man we had what I should do, he told me to come here. So here I was, there I was, eNjelele.

Thuli's table was as flamboyant and elegant as it was rustic. Her bowls were serviceable wood and metal. Her cutlery was stainless steel, no fancy designs. Each morning there would be a fresh presentation of pot plants brought in from the courtyard and arranged into a complex display. Sometimes it would be the cacti in their little pots arranged among the dishes and bowls that held the scones and cream and butter and jam. Once, the arrangement of the day was a complicated display of big-leafed plants arranged to form the likeness of an elephant against one wall. It was an intricate living mural that looked like it had taken hours to create, and I never saw who put up or took down the displays and when I asked, my three companions only smiled.

I remember fresh food, fruits of every colour and texture and the juiciest flesh – I have not encountered the like since. There was dairy in more forms than I could name – fresh and sour, light creams for pouring into tea and thick clotted creams for eating with uphuthu or umcaba. There were herbed butters and plain, salted ones, cheeses soft and hard and fragrant and pungent. There were fruit jams and fruit chutneys and pickles of all kinds but there was never, ever, any meat or fish. That was Thuli's table and on top of the dairy and the fruit, Thuli baked. Not confectionery, you understand, but breads of all sorts, rolls, and buns though I never saw Thuli – or anyone else – kneading dough. I never even saw the huge ovens in her kitchen lit, yet there was always some morsel of baked goodness in the bread basket as if, like everything else, it appeared out of thin, fresh air. I knew there had to some kind of magic involved, no household staff no matter how efficient and well-trained could be that discreet. I asked, of course, and Thuli, Ras and Dwala each in their own way, told me to mind my own business and focus on that which concerned me.

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When Dwala and I weren't meditating, the four of us – Ras, Thuli, Dwala and myself – spent the evenings talking. I say talking but in fact Thuli and Dwala used that time to teach me the Histories and the Legends. They told me the stories of the Northward Trail into the interior of the land. That was the journey my forebears had taken from the lands of the south to settle in what would become Wester in Central Republic. They spoke of the peoples who inhabited the lands further north and their strange and blood-thirsty gods, and I began to understand, for the first time, why the Republic was the way it was. They spoke of the people who became the Wester and how they abandoned the gods that gave them dominion over the land they settled, and of the bloodshed that ensued as a result. I listened eagerly, comparing what they told with what I thought I knew, slowly piecing together a history of my people on a foreign land, slowly putting together the story that I tell in these pages. It was on an evening like any other that Thuli and Dwala said they were ready to tell me of their own history and how they came to be guardians of Njelele.

I looked from one to the other. "Are you...gods?" That was what I suspected, they couldn't possibly be of this world. I was still made breathless by their preternatural beauty. If they were not gods then they must be angels, although angels very unlike the pale and yet supposedly formless spirit beings that the Northern missionaries had taught us watched over the safety of believers.

"Yes, and no," Dwala replied, glancing at Thuli. They shared a smile. "We're born of water and sky and earth, but we are not brother and sister, though we find the terminology useful. We are parented by the three gods of this domain but we are not siblings. Think of it in the same way you think of you and the guardian."

That was Ras, I knew. I nodded for him to continue.

"You are both children of land and sky but you are not siblings, are you? It is thus with us."

I stared, confused. Yes, Ras and I were both human, if that's what "children of land and sky" meant, but we didn't share parents so of course we were not siblings.

"We're not siblings," I began, "But –"

Thuli interrupted me.

"It is not that important for now. Yes we share parentage, the triplet gods Khaca, Nsundu and Tshu fathered us both, and our mothers were as human as you are." She raised an eyebrow and her flat ash-grey eyes slowly bled what little colour they had, turning paler, colder, stark white, the colour of frost. "We are not siblings but we find the terminology useful and if it pleases you to think of us as brother and sister you may do so."

She had echoed what Dwala had said, almost word for word. I remembered that when Thuli and Dwala met me and Ras on the beach they had introduced themselves as brother and sister. I decided not to pursue that line of inquiry, however, something more interesting had come up.

"Er, the triplet gods who?" I stammered.

Was I supposed to know these names? Khaca, Nsundu and Tshu. Darkest darkness, blackest black. That's what the names meant and that meant nothing to me.

"Perhaps," Thuli drawled, eyes white from edge to edge and unblinking, "You know them by their other names, Ebony, Onyx and Sable?"

Chapter 20

Sanuse

This time it would be different.

They called him the Sanuse. Oh, not immediately. It took time, cunning, and skill but eventually he convinced the people of Ekuthuleni of his deep love for the land and his concern for their well-being, and they came to call him Sanuse, the wise-man who healed and protected them thanks to his influence with the Ancients.

He shuffled into his medicine hut. Walking hurt. Everything hurt. His body was completely covered in scabs that oozed pus around the edges where new boils erupted, and oozed, and bled. The skin around his neck, between his legs, and under his arms was a mass of pink and yellow ulcers, tiny boils that itched and wept no matter what he did but that he could not resist picking, flicking dry scabs into the air and wiping pus and blood onto his filthy robes. Personal hygiene had become a thing of the past. Everything hurt too much.

Despite his repeated attempts to summon the familiar it had not reappeared. His member remained soft and wilted, the only part of his body on which there were no scabs, no sores, the organ remaining a smooth, unblemished yellow. No, he could not summon the familiar but he knew what he had to do. This situation qualified as dire. He would reach out to The Elder.

His paraphernalia gathered, Sanuse knelt painfully before the altar. This was a ritual he knew well, one he had been taught by his masters long before he had been sent to Ekuthuleni. He knew exactly what to expect. There would be no familiars of any kind, not that he had had any luck with summoning one recently but he would not dwell on the humiliating failure to achieve turgidity. He did not know how the device that now lay on the altar worked, only that it did. He had used it once before when the witch-woman died, to let The Elder know of the event. He had been a little disgruntled when all he received was a casual “Well done, carry on,” before the connection was terminated with nothing said about his cunning or his ascension, nothing at all. This time it would be different.

He picked up the smooth, black device. It was cool to the touch and bore no markings of any sort. It was obviously a manufactured thing, nothing this smooth existed in nature. He tapped out a pattern on its surface, a pattern that he had practised and practised when he was in training and could never forget. When he was done the black device pulsed once and then

was still. The connection was open. He could tell by the faint glow that now came from the thing as he held it in his palm.

A few moments passed and he wondered if The Elder knew of his recent failures. But no, how could he? He needed only to be patient. The black stones – he did not know what else to call the devices – were the summons that was never ignored, not ever. This too had been drilled into him in training. The channel remained silent a moment longer and then,

"Yes? What is it?"

The voice was as clear as if the owner was standing right next to him and Sanuse wondered, as he had before, how it worked. All he had to do was tap the surface of the stone in a particular sequence and somehow The Elder was alerted. Once he acknowledged the communication the two of them could talk as clearly as if they were in the same room.

"Yes what is it, I said?" The voice was impatient now, demanding.

Sanuse cleared his throat.

"I..er..it is me, Sanuse, in Wester. Er, we last spoke when the old woman who was here before me died –"

"Your name is not Sanuse, you are but an acolyte. What do you want?"

The reminder of his status stung but Sanuse grabbed hold of what remained of his courage.

"It is the girl," he said. "I have learned by, er, esoteric means that she plans to return. The journey did not end her, it seems, nor did the mountains, nor, apparently, did the guardians of Njelele. I was told that the impure could not go there and return, yet the familiar said –"

"Enough!"

Sanuse fell silent, his heart thudding. He wanted to pick at his neck where a new itch had sprung up but he dared not put the device down. His other hand snuck beneath his robes and cradled his soft member, the only part of his body that did not hurt to touch. It was comforting, a reminder that the horrors being visited upon his body would pass.

"Do you dare question His Excellency?"

Before Sanuse could whine his reply the voice carried on, "You have your orders. If the girl returns it will be because that is His Excellency's will and for no other reason. Alright?"

Sanuse nodded and then realizing the futility of the gesture whispered "Alright," into the black device.

"But…" He lapsed into silence, worried he had gone too far.

"But?" The voice coaxed, suddenly warm. "Carry on, you have come this far."

"But the familiar said…the familiar said she returns with her strength. I-I'm not sure what that means, but it does not sound like a good thing."

"What familiar?" The voice asked. "You are not a Summoner."

"Er, no, no I'm not," Sanuse stammered. His knees were killing him. "But, er, I watched the old woman and I thought maybe, maybe it would be useful. Helpful. To His Excellency, of course."

"Of course."

Another long silence.

"Well, what is it that you want?"

Sanuse had not expected this. He had thought that he would make his report and be told his reward, not be questioned about what he wanted. What was he supposed to say?

"Wh-what do I want?"

"Yes, you have gone to the trouble of contacting me when you know the strict protocols for communication, that you may not use the devices except in dire circumstance. Twice now you have used it and there has not been anything dire, or even urgent, or even useful. You have wasted my time and I want to know, acolyte, what it is that you want from me."

The voice had become menacing and Sanuse's eyes had widened with every word. This was not going the way it was supposed to. Perhaps The Elder had misunderstood.

"Sir. Master. Highness –"

"Only His Excellency is His Highness, as you well know. Get on. With it."

"Sir. Yes. Leaving aside the familiar – although it did appear –" he sniffed, "Leaving that aside for now, I find myself indisposed, sir. I seem to be, well, moulting."

That was the politest way to describe his condition, he was sure.

This time the silence stretched until Sanuse broke it with a tentative "Elder, are you still there?"

"Moulting, you say?" The voice was gentler now. "And you say you summoned a familiar after watching the old woman – Wisest, was that her name or her title?"

"It was both, Master."

Sanuse had finally given in to fact that everything hurt and was now sprawled full length on the floor, the black device on the floor by his head.

“Why do you think you are moulting, acolyte?”

“Well, sir, I believe I have been successful with my work here. I turned the people against the old woman and then when she died – I mean when I, er –”

“When you murdered her?”

The interjection took Sanuse by surprise and for a moment he could not speak. He had not murdered that old woman. Yes, he had been there, and yes, he could have saved her life but it wasn’t his fault that she slipped and hit her head, so how could it be his fault if she died from that injury? The problem was that when he reported Wisest’s death he claimed credit for taking her life. He had been very proud of exploiting an opportunity to advance His Excellency’s cause but that didn’t make him a murderer, did it?

“Well, er, when I said – well, when she died.” Silence. “What I mean is, when she died is when it all got worse, that’s when the sores came and the pus and the blood…”

“And do you know why, acolyte?” The voice was a whisper now.

Yes. It was the beginning of his ascension. “No.”

“Because, acolyte, you visited wickedness upon the innocent. You were told to take no action against the woman, were you not?”

Sanuse remained silent, his mind reeling. The innocent?

“You were told only to magnify any doubt the villagers had towards her and where possible to set yourself up as the sensible opposite of a mad, old woman. And what did you do, acolyte, what did you do?”

A long, long silence.

“What…what should I do?” Sanuse, whimpering.

Silence.

The device pulsed once more and was still. The connection was closed. Sanuse dared not attempt to re-open it.

Chapter 21

Sonto

My season of training with Thuli and Dwala lasted well into low summer. Halcyon days, some might say. I lacked for nothing, worried about nothing – nothing except making progress that pleased Dwala. Sometimes he would call for me in the morning, before anyone was up. There is something about dawn, about the promises held in those newborn moments of the day, as if all the world is remade anew, that makes mornings precious. Some people like sunsets but I have always found that rather sad. Sunsets are for grieving, for endings. Sunrises are for joy, for new beginnings, for – it has to be said – fresh starts. Those Njelele mornings were no different. The sky shimmering from deep black to purple to orange and pink and then to brilliant, dazzling brightness in what felt like no time at all – it never got old.

I wish I could have had time to properly observe the sunrises of Njelele. As it was, sunrise – if I was awake to see it – found me picking my way down to the beach with Dwala leading the way. We could have left the compound and walked directly onto the beach but I suppose that would have been too easy. Dwala insisted on a route that took us out the back way behind the compound and into the forest which we walked through for a bit before emerging onto the beach a little way away from where the compound stood, the squat buildings mimicking the sky, turning from pale grey to pastel pink and finally white as the sun rose over the ocean. He claimed the walk gave us time to properly get the sleep out of our eyes and acclimatize to the new day.

On the beach we would meditate for a bit, go a little ways into the water to greet the Mother, and thus would commence our daily battle about how far I was willing to go into the water – not very far – and why I continued to resist the call of the Mother – because I was frightened.

Sometimes I thought I could do it. I thought I could just answer yes and walk into the water and see what would happen, but I never did. Not then. I lied about hearing the call though we both knew that Dwala knew that I lied. I told him that I could hear my name in the roar and thunder of the waves only sometimes, even though it was a ceaseless summons.

The mornings that Dwala did not call for me I spent in meditation alone, until either Ras or Thuli called me for the first meal of the day. On those days I missed the sunrise, I was never up early enough. After breakfast I could do what I wanted until Dwala sent for me, and this was time I usually spent with Ras, swimming in shallow rock-pools or walking through

the forest and learning the names of the various trees and bushes. Sometimes he would tell me what plants were good for common ailments – intolwane for tummy issues and general health, umganu for what he called "women's issues," and umphafa for sores and pain. I knew some of the plants had other, more esoteric uses but he always told me it was not his place to teach me that.

The days were mostly indistinguishable from one another, except when it rained. When the heavens opened and rain feel in seemingly unceasing sheets we sat, the three of us, and told stories or played riddles, Thuli serving an assortment of delicacies and amahewu to wash everything down.

"I riddle you I stepped on Madam and she said 'yes please,' what is it?" A dry leaf.

"I riddle you rain falls and buildings come down, rain falls but buildings do not come down, buildings never come down unless the rain falls. What is it?" The rain is piss and the buildings are solid waste. Even godlings are not above toilet humour. That was a surprising discovery.

My progress as Dwala's protege rested solely on my being able to go into trance. It seems like I went to Njelele for that sole purpose and so when I wasn't exploring with Ras or learning various protocols from Thuli, Dwala spent many hours trying to teach me how to do it. Many hours over many days because it quickly became apparent that going into trance was not something I could do easily even though it had happened without much effort – though accidentally perhaps – in Sinyoka with Nona and in the solitary rondavel. Now when I wanted to do it, when I needed to access other worlds, I was denied.

I needed the hand-rolled cigarillos that Dwala instructed Ras to prepare. I was not allowed to prepare them myself, nor even to know what was in them. This would be a blurring of boundaries, Dwala insisted. I do not know that I would recommend that level of trust but in my case, it did not even occur to me to question what I was told. Perhaps it had something to do with the godlings themselves, that I rarely questioned their instructions, or perhaps I was a lot more malleable then. Either way, when Dwala said I did not need to know exactly what herbs I smoked, I did not argue.

"A healer gives the tonic, Sonto, he does not give the recipe for the tonic. If you must know, your blend includes rose petals and chamomile for calmness, damiana for focus, and umkhanya-kude to help you access the other-realms."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"The other herbs are not for you to know. You are not inyanga, you are a quasi-sangoma. For now. Herbal knowledge beyond the mundane is not for you, and I do not want you to be confused. If the Ancients will it, you will learn in trance. But since you can't go there yet…" He shrugged. I let it go after that, and smoked what was given to me.

The first few times I went into trance were disastrous. It felt like slipping underwater without the limitations on breathing. First, my limbs would loosen and my breathing would slow. That part wasn't unpleasant. It was like drifting into sleep without the loss of awareness, and yes, I can confess that I liked it, that floaty sensation. Once I realised that was what the herbs gave me I inhaled greedily whenever they were offered. I even asked Ras if he would prepare something for me to enjoy at my leisure but of course he never did. If there's one thing about Ras it is that he would never put me in danger, not willingly, and definitely not for fun. He was then and remains now my Light side, my conscience, my rock when I need solid ground.

What is it like being in trance? In those early days it was frightening, unsettling. Now I know what to expect. But in those days…Sometimes I would find myself in a grassy plain, nothing but swaying golden grass and blue, blue sky. I could never see the sun though it was always daylight. I'd hear things in the wind, things that I could not explain. Voices, sometimes, but never intelligible. The chittering of insects, barking, even the roar of a lion, and other animal sounds I did not recognise. I grew up on the outskirts of a city, in a village that but for its size would have been called a town because it was not at all rural, not in the way we think of villages as rural. The meadows that bordered Ekuthuleni would not count as wild bush so until my journey to Njelele I had very little to do with wild, untamed nature. I had always romanticized the idea of bush living – still do, perhaps – but the time I spent traversing the wilderness with Ras had made me aware of how little I knew about outdoor survival. That primitive fear was present even in trance and despite the herbs that were supposed to relax me, and so whenever I became aware that I was in fact in the wilderness, I would grow anxious, scared. What if I stepped on a poisonous beetle, or brushed against an innocuous-looking but deadly toxic plant? What if some wild animal charged out of nowhere and gored me to death? Dwala assured me that my physical form was of no consequence in that state, that I could not be hurt by anything I encountered in that world, but still the anxiety would rear up, fear would tighten my limbs and without warning I would be thrust out of that world and back into my own, gulping in air and pretending not to notice Dwala's sighs of exasperation.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, Sonto. You need to control that world, not fear it. You must get past this irrational fear of – of everything. The grass can't hurt you." He never raised his voice, was never anything but patient, but still I knew he was frustrated and I hated myself for not learning faster.

"Why doesn't my trance take me into a place I am familiar with? That other place is so, so big, and so…empty. I just know that something will come at me and I won't know how to face it, I won't know what to do."

At that, Dwala's eyes would go flat and white. I had gotten used to those eyes without pupils and the various whites, silvers and greys that depicted his moods. I knew that when his eyes were a pure, flat white he was in tight control of his emotions, dismayed and working not to show it.

"There is nothing to fear because that landscape is your own mind. Nothing can happen there that you cannot control. When you can successfully remain there then the Ancients will speak to you in language you understand. Maybe you'll see symbols in that sky, or certain animals or plants will appear to you and in your waking life you will decipher the meaning of each occurrence. But you must overcome this fear and remain there before any of that can happen.

"As to why it appears that way – well, maybe you can meditate for that answer. I can't say it's one I have ever asked or heard asked. After all, it's your trance, your mind – I don't think anyone can answer that why except you. Perhaps your trance takes you into the savannah because your people are a people of the land."

This was interesting.

"Where does your trance take you?" I asked. Maybe if I distracted him enough we could forego today's lecture.

"I am a godling, child. I do not need to go into trance. My entire existence is –" I could tell he wanted to say more, but he fell silent.

"If you ever get past your fear and explore, you will find things there that will be of service to you, and meet people – not people, beings – who can answer your questions."

I gathered that we would not, after all, be distracted from the lecture. We had been over this many times and yet I still could not control my fear long enough to avoid being forcibly propelled out of that world into what I came to think of as the real world.

That was yet another part of my learning – learning the proper way of referring to things. This was Thuli's job. Each afternoon, after my time with Dwala and before

preparations for the evening meal, it was Thuli who was my teacher. We took walks along the dunes and ventured into the humid forest for wild fruit that she taught me to name, we walked along the beach and she told me the legends of the Mother. She spoke to me of ukugeza ngomuthi, the ritual cleansing that would remove the negative energies attracted by daily living. She showed me the plants to use for cleansing according to my cycle and the phases of the moon, and she taught me the teas to prepare for mornings and evenings, each tea with its own properties. I was never to attempt to prepare any of these baths or teas for anyone, no matter what I thought I knew about what they needed. The information Thuli gave me was for me. Like Dwala she would often remind me that I was a singer of the songs of Spirit, a healer of peoples, not individuals. I didn't understand but I thought I had time so I never pressed her, not really, for more detail.

There was the tea for protection if I was going into trance with Dwala. There was a tea to bring me back to myself when I was anxious and agitated after yet another ejection from the trance-state. She taught me how to sit when she and Dwala told the stories that were history, folding my legs to one side or the other so that I would not cramp; and for meditation, cross-legged and straight-backed.

She taught me to say ingcekeza and not idoti, because idoti is a word of foreign origin and bastardized. She taught me the proper way to address Dwala and herself – Makhosi, not the names with which they had introduced themselves when I first arrived. There was no formality to Thuli's teaching, her lessons went whichever way she thought I needed. She was gentle and calm, never impatient, unfailingly kind, but there was a coldness in her demeanour that never thawed. When I found the source of that coldness I was exceedingly dismayed. That was not a good day.

"And what did you see, what did you learn, when you lost control in Sinyoka?" Dwala asked. It was yet another day of trying to go into trance and I had told him about what happened in Sinyoka.

"Not much. I just fainted, really. I saw Wundlu. Nona said that was a sign that I was on the right track. After that Ras came to me and then we came here," I said. "That's it."

Dwala drew back from me, a quizzical expression on his face. His eyes seemed to come alive, taking on a silver sheen and sparkling, as if he had diamond tears on the cusp of falling onto his ebony cheek.

"Wundlu? As in…Wundlu? You saw Wundlu?" He was clearly at a loss for words. Not knowing what to make of this, I simply nodded in confusion.

"Thuli!" He shouted, startling me, "Thuli, come here, quick!"

We were sitting on the veranda for my daily lesson and Thuli had been doing something indoors. Ras had walked into the forest, I assumed to gather herbs as he did every few days. It was mid-morning and the sun was already blazing hot, not a single cloud in the sky.

Thuli came, too calm, as if Dwala's loud shout had not startled her as it had me, as if she was used to being called away from whatever she had been doing.

"Makhosi," she said, clapping cupped hands once or twice and then joining me on the cowhide I sat on next to Dwala, who sat on his three-legged stool with his back to the wall. Thuli nodded at my whispered "makhosi."

"Sonto has seen Wundlu." Dwala's voice was emotionless and I could not tell if he thought this was a good thing or not. His gaze was fastened on Thuli, and as I glanced at her, I found her already staring at me. Her eyes had gone from flat white to cold silver just as Dwala's had done, but here there were no sparkles, no diamonds to mesmerize. As I watched, her normally jet-black hair became brilliant white. There was no flow of colour, the change was almost instantaneous. I gasped in surprise but no one took any notice. A shiver ran down my spine. There was an air of distinct coldness from Thuli, as if she had heard expected but still disappointing news.

"She did? Where?" She did not meet my gaze. Her voice was low, her face expressionless. Dwala nodded at me to explain.

"In Sinyoka, he appeared to the wise woman there, to Nona, and I was with her."

"And you saw Wundlu? With your own eyes?" Before I could answer her, Thuli appealed to Dwala. "There is no way Wundlu would appear to such a one. Nona must have told her about it and because she was there, she thinks that counts as a sighting."

Such a one? What did that mean?

"Well, I was feeling woozy because of the salvia Nona was burning but I definitely saw him. It. Them." I was not sure of the correct terminology here, and I faltered into silence.

Ignoring me, Thuli went on as if I had not spoken. "Wundlu is – is –" She swallowed visibly, once, twice. "Wundlu has never appeared here in this most holy place, what are the chances of this being true? You called me away from my work, Dwala." She raised a hand as Dwala shifted on his stool, and straightened her back. Her voice was shaky but she seemed determined to have her say.

“This child is – a child. Yes, gifted, she has the hair, but that is all there is. The bloodlines are too diluted for any real power. She can’t even enter the dream-state, she can’t go into trance. What is she except…useless?” Her voice caught on what sounded like a sob, but her face remained impassive. Perhaps I misheard the sob.

Dwala was silent a moment, as was I. For my part, I was working through what I had just heard. Diluted bloodlines? Useless? What was she talking about?

“No, Thuli.” Dwala closed his eyes and when he opened them the silver was gone, replaced with swirling ash. “No, you are wrong. There is no dilution here, though how that is possible after so much time I could not tell you. But here she is. You have seen her hair. You have seen her eyes. And Thuli, you know what has been foretold.” His own hair had loosed itself from its braids and now lay in sheets down to his shoulders, the ends curling only slightly. The colour remained jet-black. I filed this away to examine later, maybe discuss with Ras when he returned from wherever he’d gone.

“Look at her Thuli. Look at her eyes. Look at her hair.” A hand lifted to pat my head revealed that indeed, my own hair had come undone and was now loose. I could feel movement but I had no way of knowing what was actually happening with my hair. As for my eyes, I could only assume that they too had changed colour.

Thuli got up then. “Makhosi,” she said, and with a barely perceptible bowing of her neck, she walked away.

I looked at Dwala, wide-eyed. I was still learning the nuances of address but even I was taken aback by the rudeness of Thuli’s departure. Dwala watched her as she went, and I thought he looked sad.

“I know she doesn’t like me,” I began, “But it seems there’s a bit more to it than that.” I hoped he would take the bait.

“There is,” he said softly. “There is.” He was lost in thought for a few moments, and I did not know if I should probe further.

“We did not expect that you would be, well, you.”

What?

“We knew, of course, that you were coming here. We’ve kept this place for generations, guarding and maintaining it for you. For one who would do what you are to do.”

When he said nothing more I asked, “And what is wrong with me?”

“It is not that there is anything wrong, it is that you are not what we expected. You came here knowing nothing, not even about yourself or why you came here. It was a lot for

Thuli. She has been waiting for an equal, to the extent that a human can be an equal to a godling. And you…you are not…that."

"Not Thuli's equal?" Ludicrous. Of course I was not her equal. She was a godling.

"Well, you are somewhat...ignorant. And it's hard for Thuli to accept that, especially that Wisest died to protect you. Wisest was her protege, much like you are. You were supposed to be taught and trained by Wisest for Thuli to perfect. But Wisest died with you untaught, and she resents you for that. Not for Wisest's death, that is not your doing of course, but –" He paused. "She does not like teaching basics and yet she has had to. She feels disrespected and has no one towards whom to direct her displeasure. And Sonto, you have come a long way in a really short time, that is true, but time is not on your side and you still have not gone into the water."

There it was again. Always the matter of the water. I wanted to ask about Wisest. I wanted to ask so many things but I decided to pick what seemed most pressing.

"What is the urgency? I know I came here untaught, but what has changed, really, to make anything more urgent than it was when – when I left home?" The memories threatened to resurface but I held them at bay.

"Do you know why you are here?" The question came quietly.

An answer sprung to my lips but then I paused. Why was I here? Because Sanuse, the wise man of Ekuthuleni told me to come here. But why? What was I supposed to do? Find out why my parents and the other villagers were massacred. It struck me then that I had never really questioned anything. In fleeing my grief I had stuffed away into the unlit recesses of my mind any questions related to it. Why was I the one who had to find the answer to what happened in Ekuthuleni? I looked up at Dwala.

"You know something, don't you? None of this is making sense and I know you know the answers. I feel like I should have asked more questions before coming here, or when I arrived, but it seems I just took everyone's word for it and now I have all these questions and _"

I could feel myself growing panicky, agitated. How had I allowed this to happen? Why, why had I come here? I closed my eyes, suddenly aware of just how foolish I'd been, how much danger I'd put myself in, and all for what? On the word of Sanuse, a man I didn't even like?

I felt Dwala's hand land on my shoulder. "Sonto, your questions have answers. I can tell you everything if you are willing to listen. And what I can't tell you you will find out in

trance or from the Mother herself. Go and get something to drink and I will meet you in the sitting room."

"Thuli is there," I whispered. I wasn't sure that I wanted to talk to her or that she wanted to be anywhere near me. Things had suddenly become complicated.

"It is well. It is all well. If you and Thuli must talk, you will talk. If not, then no. But it will not do for you to feel that there is anywhere you cannot be. Now, go. I will join you soon."

"Makhosi," I said. And then I stood, and with a nod of acknowledgement at Dwala"s murmured encouragement, I walked along the veranda towards the sitting room.

PART THREE

Chapter 22

Thuli and Dwala

Thuli's eyes were bright, dazzlingly bright, but there was no one around to bear witness to her tears. She dashed them away. She stormed into the sitting room and crossed through it to the kitchen, her haven, her domain, but there was no peace for her there. She knew she should not have walked away but she also knew that had she stayed things would have gone very wrong.

It was unfair, so unfair that she and Dwala remained chained to this desolate beach with nothing and no one but lesser godlings to attend them. They wanted for nothing, Ma had at least not stripped them of their power, but She had also ensured that they had nowhere to exercise that power. There should have been more humans serving, not only the lesser beings. There should have been incense, there should have been matins and vespers, the sweetly curling smoke of ritual offerings and the chants and prayers that would give her and Dwala purpose, offerings and sacrifices given to make the blood sing in godly veins as they wielded power, shifting realities on behalf of adherents.

Thuli's lips tightened at the thought of power, of once again making things happen and receiving worship and adoration in return. Her chest heaved, her eyes glittered, and the tears again threatened to fall.

Still, Ma had been merciful. Thuli had even had Wisest to teach for a time. In that while she had almost forgotten that this was her own personal purgatory, so enjoyable and fulfilling had it been. When Wisest returned to her world Thuli was sad but that sadness had been tempered by the knowledge that One would soon come who would make all right.

She waited. With Dwala she waited, never letting the memories of what had been stain their hopes for what could be. The world turned and changed and wars were buried in histories and still she waited, her twin beside her. They waited for a sign that their long punishment was over but no such message had come. Time lost all meaning and still nothing and no one had come.

Then the guardian had come, bringing news of Wisest's demise. The Others had won that battle but the war – the final war – raged on. He – the guardian – had broken the monotony of Thuli and Dwala's existence but what was one human life against the backdrop of their purpose? What could the guardian give them except news of human doings, their petty intrigue and their pointless wars?

When many months had passed since the guardian's last visit, Dwala received a vision of the girl's approach. Finally! Thuli was eager to meet her, excited to teach her, but it had all come to naught. The girl was strong in the power, oh yes, maybe even more powerful than Wisest, the most powerful human Thuli had yet known. Maybe she was even powerful enough to stand alongside Thuli and Dwala, rather than in the shadow of their protection. At this Thuli's upper lip curled just a little. Unlike Wisest, who had lived in a time when teachers were plentiful and had come to them already adept, who had benefited from Thuli's own tutelage (and Dwala's), the girl was untaught, ignorant, and the more Thuli saw of her, the less impressive Sonto seemed. The well of power she carried was virtually useless; she would never be sufficiently trained to tap it. She was too old, too stubborn and ignorant and –

No, this chit of a girl could not be the promised one. And yet, and yet...she was here, in this place that had stood for centuries against her coming. There had to be a mistake and the more Thuli watched Sonto, the more she saw how ignorant the girl was of even the most basic concepts let alone the principles of practice. The more Thuli observed the more convinced she was that Sonto was indeed powerful but Ma's purpose had been thwarted somehow and the girl was no more suited for the role of Chosen than Thuli herself was. Despite all that, Wundlu, Ma's own consort, had appeared to her. To her!

Thuli recalled Dwala's gentle reprimand when he realized that she was giving Sonto no more than the bare minimum of instruction. He had come to her in the kitchen one day when the girl was out on yet another jaunt with the guardian. Her lips pursed at the memory.

"Thuli, Thuli. You can't not teach her. You know what is at stake."

Thuli knew, but that did not mean that she agreed that this girl was the answer.

"It cannot be her. She knows nothing. Her power is useless if she will not touch it, and she will not touch it if she cannot face Ma by going into the water. You know this as well as I do."

Dwala sighed. "She can't touch it because she does not know how, and you are not teaching her."

"I shouldn't have to teach her the basics," Thuli returned. "I am not that human's minder."

"But you are, Thuli. You know this too. You are here – we are here – for that sole purpose. Why do you pretend this is not so?"

"Dwala, I know why I am here. But this is – she is beneath me." Thuli's eyes were stark white as she stared at her twin. Her beautiful face was set in expressionless ebony, a

silver sheen playing along her jaw, brow, and cheekbone. Her hair was as riotous as her face was still. The coils lengthened and shortened and twirled all around her head in a magnificently colourful exhibition that was the only indication of her high emotion. Russet and teal warred with silver in a frenzy of colour and movement.

Dwala simply watched, saying nothing. They both knew that he was right, just like they both knew what he was not saying. They were here for Sonto. It was their shared purpose to prepare her for what was coming, and the unspoken part, that it was Thuli's stubbornness that had first landed them here with this now-unwanted task.

"Ma was merciful in allowing –" Dwala began, but Thuli interrupted him.

"I know Dwala, I know!" Thuli"s voice rose but a few deep breaths allowed her to recover her equanimity. "I know, alright? How long will you hold that against me? I was wrong, I roped you in, and now we're both paying. I know." Her hair fell in a thick curtain over her face. She swept it away with an impatient hand but kept her eyes turned away from the censure in Dwala's gaze. "I'll teach the girl what I can but there's nothing I can do if she will not learn. I am not why she is unteachable."

Dwala said nothing. The conversation had ended there. He gently shut the door behind him, leaving Thuli alone in her kitchen.

Her anger dissipated almost as quickly as it had arisen but she was still a trifle annoyed. Her twin was right. Sonto *was* their purpose here. Wundlu had appeared to the girl, proof that she was indeed Ma's Chosen. She sighed. Thinking Ma *unfair* was how they had ended up banished from the realm of the gods. If this was the path of redemption, then so be it. She closed her eyes and lost herself in bitter-sweet memories of the home from which she was in exile.

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Reluctantly, Thuli returned to the present. She straightened the table runner, stood up from the table and walked to a cupboard which she opened and closed without removing anything. She walked to the sink where she washed and dried her hands before she realised that she was moving without any sense of what she actually wanted to accomplish.

She left the kitchen and went into the sitting room, settling on a low settee. She picked at pieces of lint on the upholstery as she recalled the day Sonto had first arrived on these shores. Thuli's heart hurt, oh how it hurt! Wisest was gone, without ever putting to use all the skill and knowledge Thuli had imparted. She had made no move against the Others, had not taught her successor – Thuli winced at this – and now it fell upon Thuli and Dwala to teach

Sonto what Wisest should have. That Sonto should have the encouragement of Wundlu while she and Dwala had nothing but stories...oh you could call them legends of creation but they were just stories, strings of words with which they had fed themselves through the ages of their guardianship. Still, the choice had been made, the punishment meted out, and it was not that Thuli doubted Ma, not really, it was only that – she sniffed – some encouragement would have been nice. Would their exile never end?

When the gods go to war, people pay the price. What is lesser known but equally true is that when gods go to war, godlings suffer too.

When Ma created the world as we know it, this world, one of many worlds, she did so in a way difficult for mortals to comprehend. She thought of it, became pregnant with it, and birthed it into being. Her birth-waters became rivers and oceans and her afterbirth the many fertile lands – continents. The life she bore populated the continents and thus the world was wrought. Ma was pleased and for aeons multiplied by ages she was happy and content with her creation. The other gods, each in their own domains, grew jealous, envious of the peace. And then the triplet gods Ebony, Onyx and Sable came up with the plan that split the world asunder.

Chapter 23

Sonto

The Last Witch was in her second decade when The President ordered an attack on the western regions. Her village was destroyed, her parents killed in the fighting, and the witchling herself disappeared and was not seen until she returned exactly one year later with her companion, known only as The Guardian.

They said she was a goddess in human costume. What called to the people in a language so foreign to them as speech is to earthworms was the possibility of healing. The Yster knew with the unerring instinct of all bullies what the Wester did not: that the witchling Sonto was the long-awaited Healer of the West, destined to restore the Wester nation to its glory. They hunted her while her own people rejected her because they could not understand her, because what men do not know they fear, and what they fear they hate. Together but not in tandem the Yster and the Wester gave Sonto the witchling terror, turmoil and trauma.

Source: The Dotito Writings, circa ____

The journey towards initiation as a fully trained healer has become increasingly difficult. Dwala has me cross-legged on the floor or sitting straight-backed on a stool for hours at a time, meditating. So far, nothing. I have not been able to enter the silence. I have drunk the herbal teas and smoked the cigarillos. I have steamed, I have had emetics and enemas, but beyond the glimpses I received in the early days, nothing. Not a hint of other-worldliness. They question me about my dreams but I do not dream or rather, I do not dream of anything except nonsense. Flying cats. Pages covered in script I do not recognise. I tell Thuli and Dwala this and they both sigh, but they show no other signs of exasperation and they do not give up.

Dwala says that if I cannot go into trance then he cannot teach me anything else so I do nothing but sit for hours and hours and call it meditating. We try in the mornings, we try in the afternoons and in the evenings, he even wakes me up in the middle of the night once or twice. None of it works. I am no closer to falling into trance than when I first arrived here, let alone going into trance at will which I gather is the ultimate goal.

Thuli's training continues and it goes only marginally better. At least she will not run out of things to teach me, not any time soon, anyway. There are many plants whose names and uses I must still learn, many rituals to master, and much more besides.

On this particular morning, Dwala knocks on the door of the room I share with Ras. I am alone, Ras left with the first trill of bird song while the sky was still dark. Thuli had requested medicines that could only be harvested before dawn. I'd begged him to let me go too,

pointing out that I would eventually need to learn these medicines but he had refused, and when I insisted he had covered my lips with his own and gently slipping a hand between our bodies, brought me to a state of acquiescence with commensurate skill. I had just returned from a bath and was deciding whether to go to the kitchen and hunt down breakfast, or get back into bed. When I open the door in response to a knock I expect to find Thuli but instead it is Dwala standing there, his eyes a swirling grey and blue that I have not seen before.

"Thokozani Mkhulu," I say, bowing my head and bending my knees slightly. I place one hand over the other briefly. There is a coldness about him, he does not immediately smile as he usually does. It occurs to me to wonder if he can perhaps smell the lovemaking in the air. I am reasonably confident that nothing on my freshly-washed body betrays what I was doing – or what was being done to me, let's be clear – a short while ago. I step out into the corridor just in case, and close the door behind me.

"Thokoza," he responds, looming over me. And without further preamble, "Wear your white tunic today. You will be fasting from this moment until you enter the silence. Get dressed and meet me in the courtyard." He turns and walks away before I can respond.

I cross the hallway back into the bathroom and cleanse myself as Thuli has taught me, the ritual cleanse of soap and water from feet upward and then an herbal rinse from neck downward. There are special herbs to use on my head only and that is the last thing I do before swishing water around my mouth and spitting. One normal bath and one ritual cleanse in the space of less than an hour – has there ever been a cleaner acolyte in the history of acolytes? I chuckle softly to myself. My teeth are chattering when I leave the bathroom and return to the bedroom.

Moving swiftly, I pull on the white tunic, marvelling again at the softness of the hide. I cannot tell what animal it has come from nor whether it has been dyed or is naturally this white. Are there pure white animals in this region? I do not think so but I do not know enough to be sure. Perhaps I will ask Thuli later.

When I emerge, Dwala is standing in the courtyard. He is also clothed in white and has covered his hair with another piece of soft white hide. He hands me a square and gestures for me to cover my own hair.

"Do not tie it," he says. "There must be nothing knotted on your body. Leave your sandals."

I notice that he is barefoot. I leave my sandals in the courtyard, placing them neatly on the lowest of the three steps and I follow him, covering my hair and carefully tucking in the

ends without knotting. I feel the head-wrap slipping as I walk and pause to fix it. He does not wait and I have to run to catch up.

"Today we will try something different. You will be fasting this day and every day until you master the silence."

"Yebo makhosi," I respond. "Will Thuli be joining us?" She has never joined any of my sessions with Dwala but this feels different.

"No, she is busy elsewhere."

He leads me up the beach to rock-pools I have never seen before. The tide is out and the rock-pools are empty, only a little water sits at the very bottom of the biggest of three interconnected pools. Following Dwala's instruction I climb into the largest pool, the middle one. The rock is wet and slippery in places, and the water at the bottom is cold and covers the tops of my feet. There is a protrusion about a third of the way down and I sit. Dwala remains outside the pool.

"You will sit here this day. The tide will come in and if you have not entered the silence by then – and I will know – well. It promises to be hot today," he looks up at the pink and orange sky, "and you will sit here and bake if you do not master yourself."

"But it will be too hot once the sun is fully up!"

He ignores me and walks away, all the way up the beach, away from the waterline. I notice a small canopy has been constructed, animal hide stretched over poles. The hide is wide and I can see that when the sun is up anyone beneath it will be protected from the merciless rays. He will be comfortable in the shade while I burn. This annoys me but there is nothing I can do and there is no-one to hear me mumble to myself about the unfair treatment of inexperienced initiates.

Long minutes pass and the sky lightens as the oranges and pinks fade and are replaced by a washed-out white which will in its turn become a blinding blue as the day wears on. Soon the sun will be fully up and I will be at its mercy. I wonder what this is supposed to achieve. As far as I have gathered, entering the silence requires the body to be still and at ease. This sojourn in rockpools seems to me to be the very sort of thing that is contraindicated for one wishing to enter the silence but clearly, I know nothing.

It occurs to me that I could be carried away by the ocean's current should the tide come in before I am able to leave. I swallow my fear. I realise that I have never seen these pools because when the tide is in they are fully submerged. I begin to shiver even though the day is quickly growing warmer.

Soon the sun is up and it is bright. I sit facing the ocean with my back to the beach. I am forced to close my eyes against the brightness and the heat is uncomfortable on my skin. Already I have to use my hand to shade my face, and I switch arms back and forth. I wonder how long it will take for the sun to heat the rock and burn me to a crisp. And then I wonder which will occur first – the burning or drowning.

The water is swirling around my ankles now, the tide is coming in. I have never before paid attention to how fast the tide comes in or goes out but I have a feeling it will not take long for the water to reach my knees, rise higher, and then – if I am still here – it will be over my head. I see no reason why I wouldn't be here. I look around and I can see Dwala beneath his canopy. He is too far away to hear me shout so I don't bother but I wonder, briefly, if he would really let me drown.

Too soon it seems, I am uncomfortably hot. Even the rock is warming up. The water continues to rise and soon enough it is up to my waist. I force myself to breathe calmly, focusing on the breathing exercises Dwala has taught me. Inhale for a count of five. Exhale for a count of five. No pauses, just smooth breaths in and out. I am tempted to open my eyes to see how far the water has risen but I can feel it beneath my breasts. I feel panic rising. Would Dwala really let me drown? The pool is far enough from the beach that with the tide in I would have to swim back to shore. I do not know if I am strong enough to swim the distance. I continue breathing, willing the panic to recede.

I am Sonto. Daughter of Monday. Child of Ekuthuleni. I will not die here. I am Sonto. Daughter of Monday. I will not die here. I am Sonto. Daughter of Monday. Child of Ekuthuleni. The ocean roars around me. I continue my litany. *...child of Ekuthuleni. I will not* –

The water feels warmer, could the temperature have risen that quickly? It's over my chest now and it is hard not to be scared. I continue breathing but it is all I can do not to hyperventilate. I take a perverse pleasure in the idea that Dwala will regret it if I drown. Controlled breathing keeps the hysterics at bay but I would be lying if I claimed not to be terrified. It is becoming harder to keep count. Am I really supposed to sit here and let myself drown?

Panic truly sets in as the water rises to my neck and I decide that I will not sit here helpless when I can just climb out and swim to shore. As I stand, I lose my footing. The water swirls around me and I am pulled under. I flail my limbs and then…darkness.

Sharp salt on my lips. I should be cold but I'm enveloped in warmth. Light. Dancing stars pinprick the darkness. I hear roaring waves and my heartbeat thudding slowly, slowly, a reverberant double beat. I keep count. Du-dum. Du-dum. Du-dum. Then the lights fade and I'm falling, falling, still cosily encased in sweet warmth so it's less falling and more…drifting. Du-dum. Du-dum. All around me the sound of waves and that double beat.

I am cradled in light. It is soft and warm. It is right that I am here. In this moment there is nowhere else I should be. I am at peace. The waves become louder and I can no longer hear the comforting double beat. I am frightened now, no longer gently falling but rushing, tumbling. I am swept away by an unknown current and now I am thrashing to free myself from impending danger. A brilliant light, dazzling, encloses the terror and the flailing...I can't breathe, I'm choking...then darkness.

I hear someone calling my name. The voice – male, insistent – seems to come from very far away. I want to respond but I also want rest in this darkness, this peaceful, silent darkness where only the waves sing to me. The voice grows more imperative and reluctantly I allow my eyes to flutter open.

Dwala is leaning over me. It is he who has been calling my name. The sand is warm against my back, the sun is dazzling in a brilliant blue sky, and my white tunic is heavy with water.

When I come to, coughing and spluttering, Dwala is leaning over me. I am lying on the sand, I can feel the sun-warmed grit beneath me. I sit up and Dwala reaches out a hand. I take it and stand, still coughing.

"Did you see anything? Hear anything?" The excitement is palpable in his voice.

I shoot him an angry look. "You would have let me drown!" I am furious and I give in to the emotion. "How dare you?" I shout. The white tunic is heavy, clinging to my skin in a way that would have been indecent if it was not so thick.

Dwala merely looks at me. His eyes have reverted to their usual flat white and he towers over me. I gulp, suddenly aware of how small I am in comparison.

Breathing deeply and forcing a calm I do not have the firmest hold on I say, "What was that? What was the plan?"

He says nothing, only looks at me.

"How long was I in the water?" I ask then.

The sun is far higher now, it is almost midday. I can see the compound and I am eager to get out of the wet tunic. Suddenly a wave of colours floods my mind, blues and greens and streaks of silver. I stumble and hold onto Dwala to keep my balance.

"What was that?" I hate that my voice is laced with fear.

"You were never in any danger Sonto so there is no need for anger. However, I need to know what happened. I saw you stand and then you were gone. I knew you were safe because the Mother will not harm you, so I waited. She has returned you to us but I must know what happened."

As he speaks, the swirl of colours intensifies. "I…I'm not exactly sure. I saw colours, blue and green but not like the ocean, more like…" I hesitate. "Brighter than the ocean. More depth…deeper than the colour of ulwandle."

"Did you hear anything? A voice? Music?"

"No," I begin, but then I realise that I did hear something. "I heard someone – or something – calling my name. Over and over. A voice like many voices, not male or female but…I don't know, Dwala. I need to get out of this wet thing first, maybe then I'll think clearly. Can I do that?"

I stalk away towards the compound. I do not look to see if he follows. He catches up to me and grabs my shoulder.

"Sonto, that was only the beginning of the work we do today. If you have seen and heard then that is well but it is not enough. Time is short and –"

I pull away and he is forced to let go. He does not reach for me again. "What do you mean time is short? What has changed?"

An expression I cannot decipher crosses his face and his eyes flash silver and then settle to flat white once more.

"You will continue with your fast. Do not eat or drink anything, not even water. Go and change and meet me esigodlweni."

We return to the compound in silence.

Chapter 24

Thuli and Sonto

Thuli was on the settee when Sonto entered, gently opening the door and closing it behind her. She stood, feeling her ire rise anew. It was so unfair! This child had been nothing, was nothing, and yet…Wisest had died keeping this child's secret! Her eyes had darkened to slate and for Sonto, watching her with some trepidation, it was both fascinating and frightening.

She did not know what to say. Thuli always made her feel a little unsettled, a little gauche. She was unsure now why she had come into the sitting room. She was supposed to change out of her wet tunic and meet Dwala in the room where he worked, isigodlo sokwelapha. He had no patients to heal, no clients seeking favour, fame or fortune, but unlike Thuli who had no designated area of work, Dwala only worked out of that one special room except when the work required a different setting, as had been the case when he took Sonto to the rockpools.

"Sonto." Thuli stood.

"Makhosi Thuli." A barely perceptible nod and a bend of the knee, then Sonto ploughed ahead. "Dwala said I should meet him esgodlweni. I just came here to…er…I'm meeting Dwala as he asked me to." Again Sonto questioned the instinct that had led her here.

"Oh, he did?" She tried, but Thuli could not keep the sneer out of her voice. She did not know why this child made her – godling though she was and above such petty concerns – feel uncomfortable. Sonto's hair was curling and uncurling almost imperceptibly, as if the girl was a little unsure of herself, as if she held herself ready for anything. That made Thuli ashamed. She knew she had never really warmed up to the girl. It was, she chided herself, unseemly. But oh, how she missed Wisest. She could not understand why Wisest had had to die to protect this child, and the loss of her protégé hurt. She knew that she should have opened her heart to Sonto as she had to Wisest but…it hurt too much.

"Why do you dislike me, Thuli?"

The question caught Thuli off-guard. She had gotten lost in her memories of Wisest and now the child was asking her this of all things. Thuli did not quite know what to say. Sonto was a mere human after all, not even worth the emotion Thuli was struggling with. This realization irritated her all the more.

"I don't *dislike* you," she snarled, "I just find you untaught, uncivil, and lacking in discipline. You were sent here – someone sacrificed their life for you to be here – to learn something."

"I have tried to learn everything that you have taught me."

"All you think of is cavorting with the guardian!"

Now Sonto's hair was a swirling cloud and Thuli was both pleased and annoyed to see that it remained black. The girl was powerful, no doubt, but her power remained unawakened. What then had Wisest died for? For this child who could barely channel her power to light a candle, let alone topple a government?

"Sonto, what do you know about your family?"

"My family?"

"Yes, your mother and father. I know you have no siblings."

"Makhosi. I – I told you about my parents."

"Yes you did. But I'm not asking you about their deaths." The girl's agitation was obvious and Thuli allowed herself some small satisfaction. Yes, she thought to herself, feel it again, just like I feel the loss of Wisest every time I look at you. Aloud she said, "I just thought you could tell me your family history, there is much for us both to understand."

Sonto gaped but said nothing. Thuli did not know what it was to be human but she knew what it was to be discomfited, and she knew that asking the girl about her family would be unsettling. She felt even more ashamed. The girl had not killed Wisest, had barely met her by all accounts. Perhaps she should be gentler. Perhaps –

Sonto heard herself say, "If you want to *cavort* with the guardian, Thuli, why don't you?"

Thuli's eyes paled from a darkened state to their usual white. "You motherless bitch!"

The slap was a whip-crack when it connected with Sonto's cheek. It caught her unguarded. Her head snapped back and up. She staggered backward. One step, two.

Thuli drew herself to her full height and with eyes glowing like iqhwa she snarled, "Get out."

She was shocked to realize that the girl's eyes were glowing golden. More than shocked she was afraid but there was no way to salvage the situation.

"Get out," Thuli repeated. She did not know what she would have done if the girl had said no. Sonto turned on her heel and, pulling the door open, walked out.

Thuli collapsed onto the settee. She would have to apologize to the girl at some point but thank the gods that she didn't have to do so now, there were no witnesses after all.

She looked up as she heard a footfall. Sonto stood in the doorway, eyes blazing golden, her hair curling and uncurling itself like a restless black sea.

"I cannot best you in physical displays so this is what you choose."

Thuli stood to face her.

"You slap me, and for what? What have I done to Thuli, mage-woman of Njelele, to cause her to strike me?"

Sonto's voice carried a new timbre that remained in the air a moment longer than it should have. Her eyes were as pale as spiderweb and glittered silver. A glistening sheen rippled across her features then was gone, leaving streaks of bright silver on her cheeks and brow. The silver threads pulsed as if something inside her sought release. Thuli's fists clenched then unclenched, and she took a small step towards the girl.

For a moment it seemed that even the voice of the Mother was silenced.

Then Thuli said, through gritted teeth, "You are unmothered, untrained, untaught. Yet you come here, take the guardian as a lover and…and then you tell me, *me*…!" She left that sentence unfinished and took a deep breath. "You have no respect for anyone or anything and I cannot be sure that it is not by trickery that you are here. The Ancients really could not mean for one such as you to –"

Sonto's voice cut through the tirade, that unknown note reverberating once more setting Thuli's teeth – and Sonto's – on edge. "Stop."

Sonto's scalp was pulled almost to the point of pain but it was not pain so much as it was a reminder of why she was here. She found herself welcoming it.

"You have no right to hit me, so never again. That is first. Second, do you forget that it is you who welcomed me here, you who knew my name before I told it to you. You, who gave me the room I sleep in and said nothing when Ras joined me there. Tell me Thuli, what is my crime?"

Thuli stared.

A silence fell that neither woman seemed willing to break. Sonto waited, watching. She watched the tension leak out of Thuli's body until the demigod stood, eyes downcast, looking for all the world as if it was she who had received a slap to the face. Sonto felt the tugs on her scalp fade until all that remained were the now-familiar sensations of her hair settling into itself.

"I taught Wisest. And I loved her. We spoke of you many times. Not you, of course, we did not know you. We spoke of…what you would be like. We looked forward to meeting you, and teaching you." A muscle twitched along her jaw. "We waited a long, long time," she said quietly, "Wisest died waiting."

"She need not have, she should have taught me, she could have shown me so much –"

"Don't interrupt. Come, let us sit."

The tension that had filled the room eased. We settled on the settee, wary of each other. Then Thuli got up, went to the kitchen and returned with a tray on which stood two glasses of water and a bowl of small, brown fruit, sweet and chewy. I could not name the fruit and did not ask.

We ate in silence. When the bowl was empty, Thuli got up and took it to the kitchen. When she returned, she settled herself on the settee next to me.

Still the silence stretched.

This is it. The big reveal. The moment when Thuli tells me a big secret and clears up all the confusion. You must understand that at that point I still did not know what I was doing, and there was still the matter of my near-drowning to decode. I had not forgotten that Dwala had asked me to meet him but I hoped he would be more interested in what had happened than in why I was there in the first place.

I am mulling this over when Thuli begins to speak.

"Your parents were given you to raise on condition that they teach you and prepare you for your part. It is unfortunate that they did not do a better job but who can blame them for their ignorance? Those were difficult times but they did keep you safe at least. However," she pauses and takes my hand.

Before she can begin speaking I gently extricate myself from her grasp. It feels a little weird to be in bonding mode with her when she hit me not that long ago. Something else happened – I'm not sure what but there was a moment when I felt that I could strike Thuli in return and not get my face smashed in. Thuli and Dwala do something to their bodies or perhaps to me so that they don't look as tall as they did that day on the beach, the day I arrived here. Even their good looks seem to have toned down a little. The twin godlings are still exquisitely stunning but no longer heart-stoppingly so and there is no doubt whatsoever – no matter how human they look – that either twin could break me in two like a tooth pick if they wanted. They might not always look big, but they always *feel* powerful. But there was a moment when I stood up to her when I felt like…like I could take her. I am jolted out of this

contemplation when I realise that Thuli has been speaking to me while I've been relishing the momentary joy of believing I could fight her. It's too funny for words.

"Sonto, are you alright? You're not listening?"

The questioning note in her voice is annoying but what can I do? Daydreams aside, I'm not actually going to fight her.

"I'm sorry Thuli, makhosi, I got distracted. Did you say something?" I smile brightly. I realise that nothing that she tells me can matter more than what I find out for myself. If I am the one then I should know. I should not be relying on others.

"I am shown that the other ones, the Others, do know of you and have tried to harm you. Do you know of this?"

I stare blankly. What is she talking about? And then I remember.

"Oh, yes. I mean, no. I don't know. You haven't told me very much, I'm not even sure what we're talking about, really." Pathetic. I force myself to do better. "I mean, I'm sorry I don't know more but I barely met Wisest. And if Sanuse is one of the Others, why did he send me here? And why me?"

Thuli's hair had changed colour. It had gone from black to brilliant white and now it shimmered pink and purple streaked with orange like an otherworldly jewel in the day's fading light.

"It is perhaps just as well that Wisest stayed away," Thuli says, a touch huffily. "Had she revealed herself, the impostor – you call him Sanuse because you do not know any better – he would surely have found you out and…well, no matter. What is is, and what must be shall be."

Another silence.

"You are already a grown woman, almost too old to teach and you have formed…bad habits. You do not know even the simplest things." She stares at me and I hold her gaze.

"Tell me, what do you know of your power, your gift?" Her gaze is steady.

"Not much," I say. "I just know what Sanuse told me, that I need training, I need to be an initiate and learn everything. That's why I'm here. I came here because…because…"

"Because the false healer told you to find this place. Why did you listen to him? Did you not question his purpose?"

This was the question I had been dreading. "Well, yes. But I had no one to ask. And if he is so false, and he sent me here, doesn't that make you and Dwala…?" I dared – I actually

dared – to raise an eyebrow at her. If she had struck me for insolence she would not have been wrong to do so. Thankfully she did not.

"It really does not matter how you ended up here; I too have many questions about that. But what of your parents, what do you know of them?" Thuli asked.

"I know everything. I mean, I know who my parents were. I wasn't very close to my mother, she did not seem to like me much. You remind me of her in a way," I said, glancing at Thuli. "But my father was very fond of me, we were very close." I felt a pricking behind my ears and hoped Thuli would not notice how close I suddenly was to tears. Only children and fools yearn for what they cannot have. But still. "I miss them a great deal."

This time I meet Thuli's gaze unflinchingly. "Why were they killed? Why was my village destroyed? They killed so many people!" I refuse to cry. I. Will not. Cry.

"We think that the Others were looking for you and without knowing what you looked like or your name, they just – well."

"But they killed men too, if it was about me they would have attacked only the women and girls."

"I'm not sure whether you're young, stupid or naive, but I don't think I need to explain to you how war works. Make no mistake Sonto, this is a war and it is an old one. You must end it or rather, you must at least even the playing field."

I feel offended but I want answers more than anything else right now so I let the bit about my stupidity and naivete pass. It's not like I can prove her wrong, I did ask a not-so-bright question.

I open my mouth but Thuli speaks before I can formulate a new question. "The false one made a mistake sending you here but that is not surprising. He could not identify you to the soldiers that night and risk blowing his cover, and since he had no way of proving your identity and could not get rid of you himself he did the next best thing. Sending you here was not a bad idea. You should have gotten lost in the mountains and if by some bit of luck you made it to the coast, you should never have found this place because it no longer exists."

"I'm sorry," I say, confused. "What do you mean it no longer exists?"

"Njelele was a great place of healing and teaching of healers. Acolytes and initiates came here from all over – except the North, they have their own schools – but things happened – you don't need the details right now – and the temples were moved…elsewhere. Sanuse, as you call him –" she mumbled something to herself, "is a healer and he would know that, so he expected you to find nothing if you did make it here."

"So the temples were moved but you and Dwala remained here, to wait for me?"

"Yes. I'm sure you've noticed the chores are always done and the larder cupboards and pantry are always stocked. In the old days we had human as well as, uhm, heavenly servants but now we are in reduced circumstances."

"Reduced circum– you mean you've fallen on tough times?" It's patently ridiculous and I laugh. "The going is tough and you can't get going?" I'm still laughing but Thuli doesn't even crack a smile. The laughter dies on my lips because even the funniest most incongruous story needs to be shared for it to be truly enjoyable. "May I ask what happened?"

"Your humour needs to be refined. Perhaps you should work on that." Thuli pats her hair and immediately it turns silver and settles, framing her head like a light-wrought halo. "Dwala and I remained here to wait for you and Ma made sure our needs were met."

There were many questions I could have asked but I settled on one. "Who are the Others? What do they want?"

"When we have time I will tell you about the wars that were fought for this world. What you need to know now is that what they want is control, more control than they have now."

"But…who are they?"

"They are the gods and demigods that rebelled against Ma, and the humans who serve them. It is they who have hunted down the gifted and corrupted them as they did with the false one whom you call Sanuse, or had them put to death as we suspect they did with Wisest and tried to do with you."

I take a moment to think. "Forgive me Makhosi, uxolo, but how do I know that…that you aren't the Others? I mean, given that Sanuse sent me here…"

Thuli's laugh is like bells. "Oh child, I understand your mistrust but you need not fear. You crossed the mountains safely and found this place that is hidden from humans. You're being initiated and your power is undeniable. If you were not meant to be here you would know. Did you not say that the healer of Sinyoka – what was her name?"

"Nona."

"Yes, Nona. Dwala told me that Wundlu appeared to you both. Do you think that the power that brought all those things about could fail to warn you if you were in danger here?" She raises an eyebrow as her eyes shimmer silver.

I still have many questions but I am increasingly aware of the passage of time and the fact that Dwala is waiting for me.

"We have not had the easiest start," Thuli continues. "Perhaps the fault lies with me but we are here and here we must begin. Tomorrow, you will enter the water."

She stands so abruptly that I am startled. "Be ready at dawn," she says, walking out of the room.

She is gone and I am left alone in the white-walled circular lounge, puzzled. She doesn't know that I have already been into the water. How could she not know?

When I enter isigodlo later, still reeling from my encounter with Thuli, Dwala is seated on a pure white cowhide. He has also changed his tunic. The one he wears now is grey with blue-black streaks on the flanks. It is some kind of animal hide with an unusual enough texture that I have never seen it before. His hair is uncovered, it forms a black cloud around his head, a little flat on the top. I find it a little annoying that it is not a perfectly round afro. As I watch it turns pure white and wavy. I am wearing a simple brown cowhide tunic and my hair is uncovered. I lost the covering he gave me in the water. I had pulled my wet hair into a bun but I remembered what he told me about knot, pulled it out of the bun and left it loose. Water still drips down my neck and forehead and I wipe it away.

"Sit." A gesture towards the other side of the cowhide mat.

"Thokoza makhosi," I say, and sit cross-legged before him.

He has a leather pouch in his hands. It looks grimy and well-used and bulges as if it carries an assortment of small items of irregular shape. He pulls open the drawstring that holds it closed and holds it out towards me.

"Blow into it three times, say your full name and your father's name."

I do as he asks and watch in silence as he empties the pouch onto the hide between us. I look around. The room is exactly as I remember it but in the natural daytime light I see everything more clearly. The braziers that filled the room with sweet-smelling smoke that first evening are cold and empty, except for one closest to Dwala. Smoke rises from it and I groan inwardly as I catch the scent of salvia. As soon as I recognise it my temples begin to pound.

The cowhide is now littered with the dark-coloured stones and what I think are bones, yellow with age, that fell from the pouch. I hope they are not human bones. Here and there

among the stones and bones are shells in every colour, none of them wider than my palm and many smaller. I recognise cowries, and what I think must be abalone though I cannot be sure.

Using a wooden stick, Dwala separates stones and shells that lie atop each other, making sure that no one piece touches another. Then he hands me a cigarillo.

"Light this over there by the brazier and smoke it."

I get up and kneel over the brazier, almost choking from the smoke. I force myself not to cough but it is difficult. I lean into the coals and inhale to light the cigarillo. Smoke fills my lungs and I lose my balance and topple over. Embarrassed and hoping Dwala has not seen as he has his back to me, I get up and make my way back to my place and settle. I smoke the small cigarillo, hoping it will take away the headache yet knowing it will not. In a few moments it is gone and I lay the butt to the side, off the cowhide.

"Sonto. You must complete your training and return to your world but you cannot do that without meeting the Mother. Today She recognized you, that is why you saw what you saw and heard what you heard, but your return so soon and without clear visions tells me that you are not yet ready. I believe that you must continue fasting and return to the water in the morning."

"Thokoza," I say. I try to recall what Thuli has taught me about asking questions and decide not to take the chance. What I need to know will come to me eventually. I believe that.

"Focus, Sonto. Kumele ulungiselele. I have summoned you here to see if your ancestors and guides, amadlozi lamathongo, can help us ready you for what must come." Taking up the stick he gestures towards the stones, bones and shells strewn over the hide. "You are far removed from your calling and your gifts but this is no fault of your own. Your people have long forgotten the ways of the Ancients. Nonetheless, you must do the needful."

He stares at me and his hair turns all the colours of the rainbow. I feel my own scalp tingle and wonder if my hair has changed colour too. He seems to be waiting for a response.

"Thokoza makhosi," I say.

"Thokozani. You will not eat or drink anything the rest of this day." He looks upward at me then down again, at the bones. "Unfortunately we do not have time for any of the rituals that we would perform to invoke your bloodline, you are on your own. I will give you what help I can, naturally, as will Thuli."

I sit in silence for a moment and then belatedly, "Thokoza makhosi."

He opens his mouth as if to speak but instead sighs and nods for me to speak.

“I did eat. With Thuli just now. We had some fruit and water. I’m sorry I forgot.” I keep my head lowered. I hear him sigh again, and then he speaks.

“Tonight you will sleep in here. You will not leave this room until I come for you in the morning. Liyavuma?”

I have many, many questions but I sense that this is not the time to ask.

“Siyavuma makhosi, thokozani.” I watch in silence as he gathers his paraphernalia back into the pouch and pulls the drawstring closed.

“Thuli may or may not come to you here, but the Guardian will not see you until tomorrow. Depending.”

Depending on what, I wonder, but I say nothing. I only nod my acceptance of the rules.

“Are you feeling lightheaded? I can prepare a draught for you but that is all you may have. There are many hours between now and morning and you will spend that time in silent meditation if not sleep. The draught will not count as breaking your fast, but you may not like it. It is bitter but it will help you sleep and perhaps dream a dream that may help you. It is up to you to take it or not. I will return.”

He leaves the room and I am alone. I am on shifting quicksand and I am desperate for someone to throw me a rope. I lie down on the cowhide and then sit up again. It is only mid-afternoon now, how will I occupy my time until dawn? But that is the least of my worries. My head has begun to throb at the temples and I know that it is a combination of hunger and salvia smoke. I wonder, as I drift off, why they had to call it sage. Salvia is a perfectly good name.

Chapter 25

Sanuse

Everywhere hurts but Sanuse knows what he must do. Slowly, painfully, convincing himself he is as light as air because placing weight on his feet hurts, but none of it works. It doesn't work. The mantras don't work. The candles don't work. He is rotting. He can think that now; he has finally come to accept what is happening to him.

This is not some divine assignment from the heavens, this is his body and it is rotting, and the cruelest shame of it all is that he cannot bring himself to end it. He knows he should. He knows. But…he doesn't. He wants to live and he is ashamed of this, for was it not him saying that he would do anything for the Ancients, and now that it is clear that they wish an end of him, why can he not do it? He could, he knows how. But he wants to live.

The sounds of the bush are comforting as he makes his way slowly through the night. Walking hurts too much, he cannot keep his balance. He falls enough times that he has accepted that he is not walking anywhere. So he crawls. On all fours. Sometimes he shuffles on his bottom, dragging himself along with his hands. It does not matter what he does, it hurts. Everywhere. But he knows what he must do and he will not let mere pain stop him. He decides that crawling on hands and knees is the fastest way to move forward. The path is wide and sandy, it could be worse. Sanuse knows that even if he had to crawl over shards of glass to get to the pool he would do it.

Sometimes he gets up and stumbles a few steps before he falls, overwhelmed by the pain and disorientation of being on his feet. More often he is…crawling. But he moves forward. He wonders briefly about meeting anyone in his current state – how would he even explain?

The black device is a heavy weight in the pocket of his robes. It has been throbbing on and off for hours, maybe days; he does not know how long he has before an alert is sent out. He voices a prayer. It is difficult to form the words and it is even more difficult to walk and try to talk at the same time but he presses forward, stopping often to catch his breath but always moving forward.

His chest burns. His throat is sore. His lips crack and bleed but he mumbles his prayer through each wince. His slow shuffle brings him at long last to the muddy black banks of ixhaphozi. The water looks oily in the moonlight, and perfectly still. The ground is soft, the mud smells very faintly of rotting eggs. He does not expect to hear birdsong at this hour but

he wonders if there are frogs nearby. The air is still as he slips and slides on the mud, headed to the water's edge. He looks around but all is silent, the odoriferous mud and the squelching of his feet as he tries to stay upright are his only companions.

On the far bank, something slides into the water and little ripples fan outward, but Sanuse does not notice.

Bbzzzz! BbZZ! Bbzzz! BbZZ!

The vibrating device startles the afflicted man. Distracted, he loses his footing. He groans as the air leaves his body at impact; a close enough observer might notice the sheen of tears on his cracked cheeks. His groans turn into sobs but he cannot give in to the weeping. Anyway, it hurts too much. The deep inhales required for a good sob-and-weep session are beyond his pain threshold; the tears go unaccompanied. He is lying face down in black ooze, his head turned to one side so he can breathe. The mud is cool and soothing on his burning, itching flesh. He imagines the pain and filth leaving his body and flowing into the muddy water at the edge of the pool. He imagines too that he can smell the fresh water and perhaps he can. Beneath the malodorous fumes of the black mud there is a clean freshness or perhaps, he imagines, the reek is tinged with the scent of pure, life-water. Wincing, flinching, feeling his skin crack and bleed with each movement, he gets onto all fours and crawls to the water's edge and then into the water, until he can lie submerged with only his head resting in the mud.

His face is streaked with tears and mud and when he feels the snot running he wipes it away with a mud-stained hand. The movement is too sudden and he moans at the pain. The ulcers that have erupted all over gape a little wider, oozing blood-tinged pus that further stains his already filthy robes. He moans, pain flashing crimson behind his tightly shut eyelids.

The device is nestled in the folds of his robe, still buzzing even underwater. He wants to hurl it away as far as he can. He wants to pull it out and tell whoever is on the other end that he knows, he knows it all. He grunts and tries to reach it but gives up when pain lances across his chest, belly and back. His pruritic, inflamed body betrays him even as he rests in the shallows where the itching and pain seem almost bearable. Is today a scheduled call day? He cannot be sure.

Missing a scheduled call triggers certain protocols to rule out enemy interference but Sanuse cannot bring himself– no, even if he wanted to he could not put himself through the pain that it would take to reach into the folds of his robe, pull out the device, and perform the necessary movements to unlock it. He has already missed so many calls. What will be, will

be. He smiles faintly as an old tune filters into his mind. He would mouth the words if he could but he can't so he lets his inner voice carry the tune. It's a foreign song, a Norther song probably, one he heard often when he was completing his training in Big City, before this mess in the backwater that is Ekuthuleni. It is apt, he thinks. *Que sera sera.* Everywhere, everywhere hurts. *Whatever will be will be.*

He wakes up gurgling and gasping, flailing in the water. He dog-paddles back onto the bank and it is not until he is lying on his back, breathing heavily, that he realises he is pain-free. He stills and listens to his body. Not an ache, not a twinge. He brings one arm up and stares at it. His robes are bright yellow – it is then that he realises that the sun is fully up. The sun is bright and hot in a clear sky – it is mid-morning now, heading to noon. Where did the night go? But before that – wait. There are no ulcers on his hand. He turns it over. His palm is a healthy pink, no warts, no callouses. He opens and closes his fist like a baby discovering new muscles and movements. His mind is racing but there is too much information to process. Where did the night go? How are his once-filthy pus-and-blood-stained robes now a pale and pristine yellow? This is not the orange-yellow that he had chosen, this is a different colour altogether. That's when he notices that the mud has not stained the robes, has not even stuck to his hand.

He scrambles to his feet, confusion and fear warring. Confusion wins; he must resolve that first. The water is calm and still, reflecting a clear azure sky. Nothing unusual there. The mud beneath his feet – his sandals are gone – is as black and odiferous as ever but it's as if his skin and his robes repel the mud. His feet are ankle-deep in it but when he balances precariously and pulls one foot out it is clean and only slightly damp, the mud slides right off it. He tries to smear some mud on his robe, it does not stick. He tries to recall if this has happened before, if this is something he knows about this place and then slowly, slowly, the memory comes into focus and he sits right there in the mud, his elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands.

He saw her. He saw the girl. Sonto. He recognised her even though it has been many months since he sent her off. She looks the same but…different. Her hair is twirling gently, reminding him of the old woman as she lay dying, her hair curling away from his touch. The old woman is here too. He finds that he cannot meet her eyes. She too looks no different than when he last saw her. He recalls the roiling purple and azure sky. That achingly beautiful music that came from nowhere and everywhere.

He cannot see himself in this memory but he hears himself say: “No, I will not,” and then “*Ehe, ndanzva*, I hear and I obey.” A ghostly sensation on his eyelids and then he is swallowing brackish water as he tries to gulp for air.

His heart is pounding now as he lifts his head, trying to distract himself from the memories that flood his mind. Is it a true memory or is he recalling a dream he had while lying in the water? He cannot be sure. He feels something on his arm and flicks at it but it is only his wet robes. This calls up a new memory…something cool, dry, living. It glides over his body ever so slowly but he cannot move, held immobile by something he cannot see. The…thing…glides all over his body and the ghost sensations make him retch. A snake? He would vomit if there was anything to bring up. He cannot recall when he last ate. He shudders and squeezes his eyes shut but that does not help. Hoping action will dissipate the unpleasant memory, he bends to examine his legs. Smooth brown skin, fine black hair on his calves. Not an ulcer to be seen. Not a hint of yellow anywhere. He straightens and pats at his belly and his shoulders…no pain. He probes his armpits. Nothing, only the dampness of his robes and beneath them, smooth disease-free flesh.

He walks gingerly out of the mud and onto the grass and collapses, his mind reeling. Behind him something long and thick, something with vividly marked almost iridescent scales glistening in the bright sunlight, slides into the water unseen.

Chapter 26

Sonto

Few writings have survived from the time of that great war. It was not the Norther War, nor even the Independence War that came after. This great war was fought in the bloodless realms, where the weapons are forged of darkness or of light but never both; the realms that they call of Spirit. The fragments that remain speak of a woman, a witchling, who razed down the capital and salted the earth upon which its corridors of corruption and violence once stood. In all our searching we have found no evidence of this, not even in orature, although it is fact that in that time the House of State – more commonly known as State House – and the capitol were indeed set alight. This oral history confirms. The claims made of the woman – the so-called witchling – require belief in a god or gods whose existence cannot be proven or known, only believed. This being so, researchers are advised to seek other sources if these fantastical claims are of interest.

The Dotito Writings, circa ____

I opened my eyes to a place that reminded me keenly of another place I'd been to before. The air is soft, but, unlike before, the music is discordant. I have since been back many times and have learned the secrets thereof, but even now I am at first disoriented when I am unexpectedly pulled into someone else's mind-space. It is usually not very nice but the inescapable fact about it is that it makes for some supremely secure conversation. There is no way to enter another's dream-scape except by their strong determination to have you there.

The writings say that izangoma zoqobo, the real healers of old, could manipulate dream-scapes and even hop through them without going through the land of the waking first. I remain unconvinced. Of course I continue to work on this.

Some call that place the dream-scape or simply the dream; others say it is the land between worlds and that it is the doorway to every world there is, even the ones that exist only because someone made up a story and told it. I prefer *mind-scape* because that is the term that seems most fitting to me.

My first thought when I heard the music was that I was in the same place I went to from the hut in the Fields of Stone but this was a different place. I have since learned that it is all the same place really, it just depends on how you get there.

The music was strange, as if it did not quite know if it would be fast or slow, or haunting or happy – it was rather unpleasant. That's how I knew it was a dream. All I had to do was wake up.

I could walk, I had my arms out feeling my way around so as not to bump into anything but the solid ground – hoped it was good old earth because a thick pale blue mist roiled around my ankles, I couldn't actually see my feet. That's exactly as scary when you

think about it as you expect it to be. The fortunate thing then was that I had so much to occupy my mind than whether or not I could see my feet or what I was walking into.

The problem was I couldn't see a thing. My eyes were open and I could see, but there was also a mist-like blue-grey substance through which it was impossible to see. It was so think that I could not see my hand unless it was right in front of my face. It felt like nothing so I didn't feel constrained, but it was quite unnerving all the same. I tried to keep my eyes closed since no matter which direction I turned all I saw was blue-grey mist. There wasn't even anything interesting that was happening. No gradual lightening of the mist or brightening of the available light, no noises or voices. It was as if I'd been dropped into a rain cloud from which the cold and wet aspects had been removed and forgotten there, except with discordant music to keep me company.

I thought about how very alone I felt, and wondered if I would be here till morning came back in the real world. I wondered if Dwala or Thuli would check on me.

I continued shuffling through the strange mist, not lifting my feet and moving very slowly in case I was at the top of a cliff or something. I also kept my arms feeling about for anything that would give an indication of where I was. What if I never got out of this place. What if I was trapped here for eternity? That's when I felt my heart begin to pound – and then I remembered.

This is a dream.

No, this is not a dream. The music is out of place.

My eyes had been closed but now they snapped open. I was still in the same blue-grey cloud. I tried to remember what I had learned the last time I found myself in a similar place. I closed my eyes to help me concentrate without the discomfiture of looking and seeing something that makes no sense. With my eyes closed I imagined that I could hear things so I intended to quickly check if concentrating on a lighter mist yielded results. If it didn't…

I took a deep breath.

I am Sonto, daughter of Monday, daughter of Ekuthuleni. I fear nothing. I am Sonto…

I opened my eyes and was pleased to see that something had indeed changed. The mist had become darker and was slowly becoming more transparent. I closed my eyes and went back to visualizing a horizon while I recited the words.

Why a horizon? I wanted to see what there was around me. There's something disorienting about having your eyes open and your sight unimpeded and still see nothing. It's different than being in the dark but don't ask me which is more nerve-wracking.

The mist grew lighter and lighter until I could in fact see a horizon. That's when I thought to look at what I was standing on, and gave a little jump. I am proud to report that I did not scream. I merely…gasped.

The mist had cleared and I now saw that I was standing on water. *On* water.

It might be unkind of me but I hope that that feels as confusing to try and understand as it was to experience. I could see clearly that I was standing on water, I had spent many months living on the coast by then so I know what I'm talking about, but there were several problems with this conclusion.

The first was that the water wasn't wet. I could feel that my feet were submerged in something cold, but they remained dry. I was not bobbing up and down in the water as one would expect. I was balanced as perfectly as if I was standing on land. I could walk and felt no water resistance. If it wasn't for the fact that I could see ripples and tiny little waves I wouldn't have mentioned water at all but there I was, coming to terms with the fact that sometimes water isn't wet.

Since there seemed to be no danger I turned my thoughts elsewhere. I had cleared the mists and could see a horizon where blue-green water met pale blue sky but I still had no idea where I was or why I was there. Could I successfully conjure up land? And if my thoughts were so powerful, why could I not think myself back to eNjelele, or elsewhere? I know I couldn't because I tried. I tried hard.

I did manage to create a tiny island of sorts, barely big enough to stand on, but I could not hold it for long. I had no trouble thinking it into being – land ahoy! – but keeping it visible proved beyond my skill.

"It takes far more energy to imagine land coming up out of water than it does to imagine water covering all the land," said a voice.

I spun around, lost my balance, and fell into the strange unwater-like water. I did not expect to actually fall in, I expected the invisible barrier to break my fall. I was choking and gulping when my head broke the surface but a moment's clarity – *you're not actually drowning you know* – put a stop to that.

Amazing how the mind works sometimes, isn't it?

I found myself borne up and out and set on my feet. I could not tell you how it worked but as long as I stayed upright, well, I stayed upright. I looked around for the owner of the voice. No, it did not occur to me to be worried.

The place was both strange and familiar, especially now that I could see further than before, from horizon to horizon. Not that there was much to see. There was only the blue water-like mist that now swirled around my feet and stretched far away to the horizon, and blue-green sky above. There was no sun or moon, nothing else, and the air was soft, warm and still.

I had successfully used my imagination to clothe myself in a simple white sheath although the colour and style were not my choice: I had thought only of not being naked. As I looked around for the person who had spoken, I noticed a shadow approaching from the east. It resolved into a raft of sorts, simple wooden planks tied together with twine. On the raft sat a woman of regal bearing and stunning beauty. She sat cross-legged in the middle of the raft, facing forwards. The not-water water rippled as the raft moved closer but when the expanding ripples reached my feet and ankles there was no discernible sensation. The raft approached rapidly and soon enough I was able to clamber onto it. It was a clumsy movement because I kept thinking the craft would tip me into the blue-grey substance, but it stood rock steady.

I examined the woman now sitting across from me. I sat cross-legged as she did, and shuffled closer so that our knees and feet touched, making my skin tingle just a tiny bit. She seemed to be solid flesh but her beauty and the clothing she wore – not to mention her sudden appearance – all pointed to origins other than earthly. She wore a simple camisole of silken material, pure white. The contours of her body were plainly visible. Her midriff was bare. With the camisole she wore simple pants of the same silken material but they were a blue so startling that I found myself trying to name it. Sapphire? Cobalt? The material shimmered and shone as if it was shot through with silver thread and I gave up on naming the colour. Her hair was poetry in motion and that's not an exaggeration.

I had been immediately drawn to the woman's hair and now that I had examined her clothing and decided that mine was equally appropriate, my eyes returned to her magnificent hair. And it was magnificent. It was a massive afro, perfectly shaped and styled, and for all its roundness it was so wide and so high that gravity-defying was an apt description. The curls were tight and uniform, and I found myself wondering how the style had been achieved. I had not seen an afro like this since leaving Ekuthuleni, and certainly none anywhere near this huge.

But it wasn't just the size and shape of her hair that was impressive. It was the colours that made it truly breath-taking. As I moved closer, I could see that her hair shifted through

the spectrum of the rainbow, from deep reds to vibrant oranges, sunny yellows to lush greens, calming blues to rich purples. It was as if a kaleidoscope had been woven into her hair, catching the light and reflecting it back in a hypnotic dance of colour. I couldn't help but stare in awe, but she seemed completely unfazed by my admiration. She simply smiled and extended her hand.

"Ekuhle, Sonto. It has been…a while." She put out a hand.

Her voice was low and dusky as if it was made for evenings, but it made me feel warm inside all the same, as I knew it and knew the owner to be a beloved friend. The traditional greeting threw me off balance for a moment when I realised I did not know how to respond in the same vein.

"Er. Thokozani." I played it safe. Her answering smile told me that she knew what I was doing.

I took the proffered hand, feeling a surge of warm energy. "Your hair is incredible," I blurted, unable to contain myself.

The woman laughed, a sound that was both musical and infectious. "Thank you! It's a reflection of who you are: vibrant, confident, and unapologetic."

"Who *I* am?" I was confused. And then I remembered that the old, old woman I had met all those months ago in that lonely hut had claimed to be a version of me. "You mean, you are me?"

"We're not going over that again but yes, I am a potential version of you. Or an other-universe version of you. I am the you you might become if certain things happen in certain ways."

I tried to recall what she had told me before but the memory was fuzzy.

"Did you bring me here?" I asked.

"No," she said, and as she spoke the raft began to move.

I was startled but I soon realised that the raft's movement was no different than its stillness. I relaxed once more.

We talked, and I learned that Sonto-the-other was from a version of my future in which I would become – of all things – an artist, in addition to the work of healing. According to her, I would continue to embrace my hair in its natural state, shunning all the fashions that would come and go in favour of wearing my own hair always.

"You may not know it or believe it but your hair – or should I say our hair – is more than just a symbol of our strength and resilience. There will come a time when hair is

politicized, when rules and even laws are passed about how our hair may or not be worn, but you must always remember that it always just hair."

"It is not," I said hotly. "Even Thuli's hair –"

She raised one hand and I immediately fell silent. I do not know what I thought I was doing but I regretted it intensely.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," I said. I kept my gaze firmly on the ripples in the un-water, uninteresting as that was.

"You think that because your hair reflects your emotions it is special? I suppose it is in a way, only healers' hair does that, but it is more of a warning to others of what you are rather than something that is special in and of itself. These colours you see –" she gave her head a little shake making her hair bounce and the colours tumble together in a riotous display, "– are a sign to any who see me of what I can do. I knew you would enjoy it so I'm not masking but you will eventually learn – if you haven't already, how to keep your hair black. Or white. Or whatever colour you desire."

"If it's a warning to others then how can you control the colour? Doesn't that make the warning pointless?"

"What have you been doing eNjelele? Surely you know about this, it is so basic."

The incredulity in her voice made me feel ashamed. It reminded me of Thuli's repeated remarks about how I was a know-nothing. I remained silent.

"I see," she said quietly, when the silence had stretched uncomfortably long. "Your hair is a part of you. For healers, it is also a signifier of strength and skill in utilizing power. The colours your hair takes on are in themselves of no significance, but the changing of colours tells observers about your emotional state. When I say you can keep your hair in one solid colour I mean only that the more in control you are of yourself, the less likely that your hair will change."

"I see," I murmured. "Thank you for explaining."

She talked to me of power, then. Of the importance of learning as much as I could from Thuli and Dwala because once I left eNjelele I would have only my community of healers – such as I could build – to learn from.

"There are healers, untaught like yourself, everywhere. You will learn how to find them and teach them and learn from them, and then your work will be done and you will be…me." A smile.

I felt a sense of awe as I listened to her, realizing that her hair was more than just a flamboyant style choice. It was also a celebration of her identity as a healer and a reminder of her power to any and all who saw her. It was difficult to wrap my head around the idea that I had the potential to become this stunning and this wise, and I was not a little skeptical. I kept my doubts to myself. I knew that I wanted to become this creature. As I looked at her with her rainbow-hued afro I knew that I wanted to be just like her: confident, bold, and unapologetically powerful.

"I see you had no trouble clothing yourself," Sonto-the-other said. Her voice was low and cool as if she never had to raise it for any reason. "We have a ways to go. You may lie down if you wish."

"Was it you that spoke to me before?" I asked, the first of several things I wanted to understand like where we were and what this place was that we had to reach.

"Yes, that was me. I am your higher self, in a way. A potential you, as I have said. We're going where Ma has sent us so you need not worry." She raised a beautiful eyebrow and smiled. "Your training is going well I think. You came here and you have not asked me how."

"It's…going," I replied, hesitant to describe it as going well. "When we met before –"

"We have not met before."

"In the hut, when I was going eNjelele. We met on what looked like a dying planet and you told me –"

"We have not met before. You met another of your higher selves. We are all you but we are not all each other, if you understand."

I didn't.

"There are many paths you can take. Some lead to the same end, some not. You will meet the you that is best suited to whatever you need, when you need it."

I watched the ripples in the un-water and tried to make sense of what she was saying. Frustrated, I changed the subject.

"What about this…this water. It's not water. What is it?"

The other Sonto leaned over the side of the raft and dipped a cupped hand into swirling blue-grey. It came up dripping clear water. "This is not your dream," she said, "But you are powerful enough that you can make anything you like just like you made your clothing. We will soon see whose dream has called to you."

The wooden raft skimmed the waves. I had used thought-power to turn the blue-grey mist into water and I regretted it. Being on a raft and bobbing about on strange seas was not my idea of fun. I tried to sit still like Sonto-the-other but I kept wanting to fling out an arm to catch my balance even though the raft was incredibly, surprisingly, steady. I just could not make my mind believe that this was indeed the case.

"There," Sonto-the-other said suddenly, pointing.

I looked in the direction she pointed and saw, looming up ahead, what looked like a sandbank.

"Don't be afraid. Someone called you here, a powerful dreamer, possibly another healer. I do not know who it is but you will not be in any danger. There is no danger here save what you bring."

"What?" But the raft had glided onto dark sand and Sonto-the-other had stepped off and was walking away.

Chapter 27

Sonto

A Voice. A clear Voice like bells, a Voice that no earthly throat could reproduce, spoke just as we crested a hillock overlooking a rather uninteresting plain. The raft bobbed lonesomely where we'd left it.

"You are in need of no guidance but mine now," the Voice said. "My son is waiting. Be kind to him. Have mercy on him. He was only lost."

I looked around for Sonto-the-Other but she was gone. I knew this Voice. It was the same Voice I had heard when I was in the water eNjelele. I know it was the same Voice but I do not recall what was said to me then for my mind fills with music when I try to remember. Ma?

I looked around and saw that behind me the landscape had changed. The raft was gone, the strange ocean was gone and in its place was nothing but sand, dark, grainy sand. I stood atop a hill, and looking down on the other side I saw something of an oasis. I could see a clear pool, the sand around it covered in green grass and lying in the pool the figure of a man.

"Go to him." The same Voice spoke again. "Help him and help yourself."

I stumbled towards the yellow-robed figure on the ground. The man lay half-submerged in the water, bobbing up and down with the water's movement. I waded into the cool water and pulled him onto the grassy bank. It was Sanuse, but not like I'd ever seen him.

He looked younger and his skin was no longer that sickly-yellow but was a smooth deep brown, grey-tinged from being in the water. He was breathing normally and I wondered if I should wake him.

As I examined him for injuries, lifting each arm and leg in turn to see if he gave a response that would indicate pain I saw, curled up near his head where it had not been before, a little green and golden snake. It was about the length of my forearm, and its flat diamond-shaped head was raised while the rest of its body was coiled beneath it. I paused what I was doing and took a deep breath. I had never seen a snake this small – not that I had seen many then, certainly none as brightly-coloured.

"Sssonto. You are here, asss you should be. It isss good to sssee you again."

I knew that it was the snake and not the earlier Voice. This voice was sibilant but smooth, and I was not afraid.

I did not know how to greet this being which was obviously more than a mere snake so I said nothing, only nodded and smiled. I remained still, unsure what to do next.

"We have met before, you and me. You were very young and I…I wasss…not."

Could this be Wundlu? I thought not. Ma's consort would have no need to appear as a tiny snakelet. So who? Or, what?

"The man before you hasss causssed you much trouble. It iss he who can tell you why we have not met properly sssince you were a child. He made it…imposssible. He isss changed now," the voice went on, "and will trouble you no longer."

A memory tickled my mind. My parents' home. My mother screaming and crying.

"Nali?"

I do not know if snakes laugh but the one before me certainly chuckled. The sound was clear in my mind. Heh-heh-heh.

"Yesss. That isss who I am. It isss good to be with you."

"But, you were bigger then. And not so brightly –" I stopped abruptly, worried about giving offence.

"My time with Wissessst was…good. I did not often exert my power, she wasss consstrained from doing her work and ssso without her to help, I grew ssssleek and fat." There was a wistful note in the voice this time.

"I'm…sorry?"I said.

"No need, it wasss not your doing. I am pleasssed to have been of ssservice to Ma in healing thisss man. He wasss filthy, full of all sssorts of foulnesss. Now he isss not and I am young again."

With that, the snake familiar uncoiled itself and climbed onto Sanuse's chest. His eyes remained closed.

"I am a creature of Ma. When I exert my power I lossse a little of my…sssubstance. The more power ssspent, the younger I become. It isss not an uninteresssting exissstence."

I had no doubt about this but I was still unsure what my role was supposed to be.

"The man hasss much to tell you. He will awaken sssoon. Do not tell him anything about me but lissten to what he tellss you."

With that the snake – Nali – slithered off Sanuse's body and into the water.

"We shall meet again Sssonto, I look forward to it." And then Nali was gone and I was alone with the still-sleeping man.

Sonto-the-Other said a powerful dreamer called me here. Doubtless, that was Sanuse. It was so strange to look at him and see a rather good-looking if somewhat pudgy young man instead of the yellow-skinned and decidedly ugly man I had left in Ekuthuleni. I could not stand over him indefinitely so I tried to put to use what Sonto-the-other had told me.

First, somewhere to sit. The grass sprang up and twisting upon itself resolved into two oval-shaped couches, each wide enough to hold several bodies. I tried to think what else I needed but nothing came to mind. I considered shaking the man to wake him but decided against it.

I had just settled into one of the couches, transforming it easily with a thought so that the back lengthened and widened, and I was half-sitting half-lying before the still figure on the ground. Once the couches were constructed there was no way to tell where they had come from, they looked as if they had simply always been there and rightfully so. I closed my eyes.

I woke up to someone calling my name.

"Sonto, Sonto? Wake up. Where are we?"

I looked into the clear eyes of Sanuse and thought of Ras. I felt a pang of longing so violent in its intensity I was wide awake, sitting up and clutching at my lower belly in confusion.

"What…what was that?" I stammered.

Sanuse had drawn away from me and now he settled himself into the other couch. "Did you make these? Very clever. Very clever indeed."

His voice was still the same as it always had been, high-pitched for a man, and grating.

The voice came out of the air, startling us both.

"Sonto. You who call yourself Sanuse. You are here because it is my will that you be here, because together you will work to achieve my ends, to foil the plans of my enemies and restore righteousness and peace in your land. Do not doubt and do not fear."

Then there was silence. I looked at Sanuse. He stared back.

"What is your real name?" I asked him. I knew from Thuli and now Ma Herself had confirmed that he had no right to the title of Sanuse. "I know now that Sanuse is a designation given to only the greatest healers, and that in this part of the world there has only been one. And it's not you."

This was my…I don't know what he was. He had tricked me into leaving Ekuthuleni and although I knew now that his cause had been thwarted, I still wanted to hear it from him.

He looked healthier than when I last saw him, but he also looked defeated and small, as if he'd lost something that was an essential part of him.

"Sonto," he whispered hoarsely, before clearing his throat. "I…I was wrong."

"How did you come to be here, how did you call me here?"

"It's a long story," he replied weakly. He seemed to be shrinking before my eyes. Not shrinking, fading. "But I need your help. I can't fix it on my own."

I pulled my seat closer to his. His breathing had become laboured. I could hear the gurgles in his chest with each inhalation. He was not doing well at all. If this was his dream or mind-scape or whatever, could he die in it?

"Sonto, I have something to tell you," he began. "I don't have much time."

"What is it?" I asked, sensing the seriousness in his voice.

"To tell you would be to betray my people, my…my betters. But I have sworn to the Ancients first and I must…" He paused. "I must fix it." He swallowed and it looked like it hurt him. "I was working with the enemy, *your* enemy – but I swear I didn't know that - and my mission was to find you and…destroy you. No, not destroy. As long as you were untrained you were no threat so I was to make sure you were never trained and to…to kill you…if you found a teacher."

None of this was news but it was still shocking to hear. I simply stared at him.

"I didn't…I didn't kill Wisest. That was…an accident. I didn't know you were you until the night of the attack and then I sent you away because…because I thought you would…die…in the wilderness."

"You sent me eNjelele and I found teachers there. I'm learning."

"I know. I know." He coughed again. "The Ancients' purpose can be interrupted but never thwarted. You ended up where you were supposed to be." He chuckled then. Softly at first and then he was laughing outright, in-between the coughs that racked his body.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked. "You look…different, healthy, but you're not, are you?"

He reached out a hand but I drew away and then instantly regretted it when his face fell. I let him hold my hand as he spoke. His was cool and dry.

"Why?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "Why did you call me here? You did, didn't you?"

"I was afraid," he replied. "Afraid of what you might become. I thought that I was doing the right thing, that I was helping to stop the Wester scourge."

I was not surprised. Not really. “Scourge?”

He looked so sad then, I almost felt sorry for him. I knew what he was talking about but hearing it said felt different somehow. The Yster were willing to use magic against my people. Not just guns, not just politics, not just oppressive laws, but supernatural and evil power. This was more than just ethnic enmity, this was something deeper, bigger.

For a long time there was silence between us.

Finally he spoke.

“Do not ask me how I know this, but this is not a human war. The ones in Big City, my…er…my former …teachers…they have allowed themselves to be manipulated by higher powers. It’s about a heavenly war, it’s about Ma and those who oppose her…even if you could destroy the ones in Big City it would not change anything, the ones they serve, the real power behind what they do…they will just find new human slaves and continue the war. Maybe you’ve heard of them, the Others?”

He looked at me expectantly. I thought back to what Thuli had taught me about the angelic wars. I thought about Ras.

“So what must I do? Why did you call me here?” I asked again.

“You are special. Your actions can make or break the world.”

“That sounds…dramatic,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“When your people crossed the Mother River into this land, they requested passage from the River Goddess. I cannot speak her name. They made a pact and they did not keep it. That’s the first thing. When they settled, they made another pact with the land for it to allow them to flourish and prosper. The healers of old did it on behalf of the people.”

I waited while he coughed, saying nothing.

“The pact was that they would tend for the land, care for it, and always appease the…the ones who needed appeasing. But just as they did not keep the pact with the River Goddess, they did not keep that one either.”

“But what does that have to do with Ma?” I asked, confused.

“In the war for dominion of the heavens – it is an old war – it was decided that –” He broke off in a fit of coughing, and then he slumped over, his eyes closed.

I jumped up, alarmed. “What?” I asked, shaking him by the shoulder. “Wake up! What was decided?” I shook him some more.

He came to, blinking and gasping.

“My time is short, Sonto. You must go to Big City. The answers are there. They know…they know what I have done and…”

Before my eyes he began to shimmer and fade. I called his name and then remembered that it was not his name. And then he was gone.

Chapter 28

Sonto

I slowly opened my eyes, feeling disoriented. The dimly lit room was familiar, the smell of old salvia nauseating. The braziers had gone out but the smoke still hung in the hair. The candles were burning low and because natural light filtered into the room through the lace curtain at the window, they were unnecessary. I stared at them, trying to reorient myself and wondered if I ought to blow them out. Probably not. Ceremonial candles are snuffed out and since I was not sure if these had been lit for my convenience in case I awoke in the dark or for some other purpose, I left them alone. I sat up stiffly. Someone had placed a soft ixaba over me while I slept and I pushed it away. My body ached, my mouth was dry, and I had a headache. I eyed the braziers again. *Thanks, Dwala.*

I had never been in isgodlo except in the evenings. The soft morning light that seeped in through the small windows was brightening and I knew that I had slept way past dawn. The walls of the hut seemed to recede into the distance as they always did, but trying to figure out the limits of the room made my headache worse. I wondered if I would ever have such a place to call my own if I would always be moving from one place to the next. I remembered what Sanuse – I still did not know what else he had said about going to Big City. There had been a finality to his words and I felt the same rightness that I had felt when he told me to leave Ekuthuleni. Was that his influence over me still, or was that the work of Ma and the Ancients, setting my feet on the path they desired? Was I a pawn, a willing acolyte, or something else altogether?

I walked over to one of the shelves, noticing how the other walls blurred as I moved closer. When I changed direction the wall I now faced came into focus and the other became blurry. I wondered how Dwala ever placed anything on the shelves but probably everything in here worked differently for him. I realised, as I stared at the objects in front of me, that I did not know what anything was. Nothing was labelled. I saw jars full of dried flowers and leaves, odd-shaped rocks and crystals in a rainbow of colours, and vials and bottles of all sizes filled with colourful liquids. I suspected that some of the things were just decor, there was no way everything was useful. It's not like Dwala had any clients anymore, I thought to myself.

As I looked around isgodlo – touching nothing because you never know with healers and I imagined healer-godlings to be even more territorial – I felt a deep sense of gratitude. I was grateful for the teaching from Dwala and Thuli, and now that I knew that they had been waiting just for me, bearing this lonely forsaken place just to meet me and teach me, I felt a new warmth towards Thuli. I understood her better after my talks with Nali and Sanuse, and I resolved that I would try harder to win her over.

I was folding ixaba to put it away when Dwala knocked and walked in, carrying a tray. He put the tray down on a little side-table, pinching the flame of the candle that stood there and putting it out. I was glad I had not blown it out. He stood gazing at me, saying nothing. I noted again his angular features that made him impossibly good-looking, and when my eyes met his pupil-less silver gaze, I felt a wave of calm wash over me. That was new.

"Dwala," I croaked, my voice hoarse. "I…I think I did it. I had a…a vision. I met Nali and Sanuse and –"

He gestured for me to sit, still saying nothing.

As before, we sat cross-legged and faced each other on cowhides that I had not noticed in my exploration. His was pure white as was the tunic he wore, mine was white with black spots.

His thick hair was loose and gleamed silver with streaks of blue in it. I thought back to what Sonto-the-Other had told me and I felt a curiosity about his emotional state, but chose not to indulge it.

He leaned forward. "Tell me what you saw, Sonto."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to recall the details. "I saw myself, but different. She – the Other me – told me much about how this all works," I gestured towards his hair, "but I'm not sure if I understand it fully. I heard the voice of Ma, and Nali came as well. She healed Sanuse – I know that's not his name – and then she disappeared. Sanuse told me about the plan the Others had for me. I don't think he is completely well. Anyway, he disappeared." A pause. "That's it."

Dwala's face was impassive. I watched his hair for changes hoping for insight into what he was thinking, but only his eyes changed from gleaming silver to the purest white. "This is…good. You have done well. Anything else?"

I recounted everything again, adding as much detail as I could remember. “Sanuse said I have to go to Big City and I do not feel that he was wrong. What do you think?” My heart was racing though I could not say why.

“You are the last witch of the West but that is a thing of now. It will change in time if things go as Ma wills. You will find others and learn and teach and then you will be ready. You have done well, child. I am pleased.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Now you prepare to leave.”

I expected this but it still carried a finality I was not really ready for.

“Will you and Thuli come with me? I think there is still much for me to learn. I don’t feel nearly ready enough to teach anyone, I don’t even know how I will find other healers. If the Yster have killed them all then –”

“You must not overthink. See, three things happened.” He counted off on his fingers as he spoke. “You were able to enter the silence. You say it was Sanuse’s dream and it was, but you would not have been able to do much if you had not entered the silence in your own right. Ma spoke to you so you know you are on the right track. And lastly,” he smiled wide, “You made contact with your higher self. You are ready. Thuli and I have nothing more to teach you. Anything else will come from the Ancients – they may send Nali or another – or Ma Herself.”

His smile was infectious and I could not help but smile back though I felt a little uneasy still. “So I’ll be on my own? That seems a little…risky. I don’t have the best track record you know. What if I meet another Sanuse and get sidetracked. What if –”

Again he interrupted. “Everything that must be will be. Now, this is a herbal tea. It will replenish your lost energy and then you can eat.”

My mouth watered. “I can? You said I entered the silence, does that mean I can do it at will?”

“Not at will, it will not work that way for you and perhaps I should have known that, but you can enter at…need. When you need to, you will. You are not one of those who must take herbs or fast, you are one of those who will go into trance when you need to, not just when you want to. It means that you cannot heal on demand but that you heal as Ma leads. Some say it’s a weakness but I believe it makes you invulnerable to corruption. What happened to Sanuse can never happen to you because you will not use earthly things to move the heavens. You are the earthly thing that heaven moves.”

It sounded like a weakness to me and I said as much. “Sanuse and his…team…are able to manipulate forces beyond ordinary human control but I cannot? That seems unfair.”

“Sanuse – we really must stop calling him that – how about we call him the Yeoman? That is the name by which he was known before. Right. The Yeoman and those he serves are powerful, Sonto, but they are wicked and they taint everything. By making you a healer who does not need external paraphernalia to heal it means that you cannot be given anything that will attract attention you do not want. It also means that you cannot be manipulated through the use of magic paraphernalia. You are protected in that way. Do not think of it as a weakness but as a shield.”

I wanted to tell him that I was some useless kind of healer if I couldn’t actually heal, then I remembered that he had said I could not heal at will but at need. I asked him about this.

Dwala sighed. “Sonto. You are not a healer of people, but peoples. You are a healer of places. You will not heal individuals. You will heal your nation.”

The pout I had settled into at the idea of limited powers – don’t judge me, I had heard what the Others could do – dissolved into open-mouthed confusion. “What?”

Dwala smiled at my discombobulation. “You do not mean to tell me that after everything you have seen and been and done you thought you were going to work with mere human frailty?” He laughed out loud. His laugh was silky, almost sensuous, but it just made me think of Ras. Suddenly I missed him so much that I gasped as a sharp sensation pierced my chest. I clutched at my heart and gasped. Ras’s face swam before my eyes.

Dwala’s laugh cut off abruptly.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s the other thing. You and the guardian. It is as it should be. Come, ask me your questions and then you can go to him. He is waiting and if what I think happened last night did indeed happen, he is experiencing what you are, too.”

“What?” The sensation I had felt was not pain as such but it was certainly noticeable. “What do you mean?”

Dwala looked down at his hands where they rested between his knees. “Yesterday morning when I came to find you, er. Well.” He straightened until his hair fell over his face in shimmering pink sheets. When he raised his eyes I looked into pink-hued blue-streaked universes and felt giddy with joy. Against his dark skin and with the deeper pink of his hair, the effect was stunning. It made me miss Ras all the more. It was like looking at a slice of carrot cake, feeling the rich creamy texture of it, and still desiring, deeply and unequivocally, the opulent, silken feel of rich, dark chocolate. Dwala was my teacher. And sometimes,

sometimes, he was an incredibly beautiful man. He always made me think about the shades of difference between sensuous and sensual, and I could never quite put my finger on which word, exactly, suited him. Where Thuli was undoubtedly the unimpressed and hard-to-please older sister, Dwala was something more than a brother, something less than a lover. It was a puzzle I would have liked to solve one day.

Right then however, looking at the beautiful godling made me yearn for my lover. Almost painfully. Why was I not with him?

"Well?" I said impatiently. "I mean, er, sorry, you were about to tell me something."

"Yes," Dwala said, sighing. "When I came to your room yesterday you were, er, in a good mood." Again he looked down and this time he didn't look at me.

Was it really only yesterday? Had it only been the day before that I met the Mother? I tried to think back.

"You don't have to think so hard. I am not unable to talk about this with you."

I wanted to ask what he meant but before I could he went on.

"I have not been…patient with you. I have been blaming myself for this since you went into the silence. We did not know how you would come out of it. It did not go as it usually does."

This did not surprise me. I had realized something else that morning. Everyone had been telling me who I was but I had not tried to find out for myself. Sanuse gave himself authority of me after my parents' death. It was because of him that I left Ekuthuleni.

When I came here eNjelele everyone wanted to control me in some way. Thuli wanted me to be Wisest the Second but I think the talk we had after she slapped me meant that she might, given time, come to like me. Dwala wanted me to meet the Mother because he wanted that to be Ma's channel for me, because that is what he knew. I want to think about it some more and I desperately want to see Ras but Dwala is still speaking.

"I know that you had just made love when I came to fetch you yesterday morning."

The silence lengthens. And then –

"Nobody told me –"

"You are a hedonist –"

My jaw drops. I am sure that I have misheard. A *hedonist*? It is laughable. Indeed I laugh. Dwala is merely smiling at me, looking like his usual self again. I think back to what Sonto-the-Other said about hair colour and emotions and I wonder what he could have been

thinking? I wonder if he knows that I did not come here to be Wisest, or to follow a path chosen by him. Godlings they might be, but I know now who I am.

"Yes. Sonto. I do not mean it as an insult. It is a…a way of describing a person. Some people are, er, like Ras. He is driven by his…affection…for you.

I note the hesitation but say nothing.

"Ras is made strong by his feeling for you. You are his strength and his weakness. As such, he is useless to this place since you will not stay here much longer."

I open my mouth to protest, even going so far as to lean forward in a look-here sort of way before I get a hold of myself and remember where I am and to whom I am speaking. I do not want to but I think about how badly it hurt when Thuli slapped me, and I hate that something inside me cringes.

"You are a hedonist in the real meaning of the word. You are one who does not benefit from self-denial, as many do. Thuli and I come from a place where we are powerful and we have had to learn the ways of this world. We had forgotten that you already have this knowledge within you, you did not have to learn as we did.

My mind is reeling. "I'm sorry. What are we talking about?" It is difficult for me to focus on what he is saying but it sounds important. If I listen will he go away sooner?

"Makhosi," I say. I make my voice stern. I have never spoken this way to Dwala. "Please. Tell me."

I hope he does not ask me what I want to hear. I'm going to listen to exactly one instruction, one story, one of whatever he says next, and then I am going to find Ras. I am about to lose my temper. The last time I did that I got my face slapped by a godling. I don't care.

"We were wrong to think that you needed to learn what we wanted to teach. I think that you came here to learn how to be yourself."

I realize that for the first time since I have been here – and it has been months, we are well into Low Summer. If I'm correct it has been a full year since Ras and I first arrived eNjelele. The days are melded together in my mind but when I think carefully I realize that in all that time I have never spoken to Dwala like I am speaking to him now. I am listening too, and what I hear him say is very much what like I happen to be thinking.

"You do know." Dwala's eyes changed to a light blue that shimmered like a spiderweb heavy with morning dew caught in just the right angle of sunlight. Meeting his eyes warmed

up my chest and shoulders and I felt a sudden surge of warmth, gentle and sweet, fill my body. I smiled. He was proud of me and I liked it.

"Did you just say that I came here to learn to be myself?"

"Yes. You were never going to learn it where you were. There was no one to challenge you."

Dwala looks more like his usual self and I wonder again about the pink hair and how I felt when I met his eyes in that moment. I do not think I have ever felt a purer, deeper love. It is the kind of love that humans try to substitute with cheap physical thrills.

"You know, don't you?" His voice is quiet.

I miss when he used to call me "my child" in every other sentence. I nod. "Will we meet again?" I ask.

"If you know that you have come to the end of your time here then you know that the end can also be a beginning."

I don't quite see how he's made that connection but I think I know what he means.

"In the end Ma's will will be done, is that it?"

Dwala stares at me. His eyes are back to a flat white. I notice that in contrast to the warm, pink tones he exhibited earlier *this* Dwala feels very far way, almost like a stranger. It is as if the light in the room dims a little.

"All I mean is," I begin, hoping he'll interrupt. I really don't know where I'm going with this. "All I mean is, uhm…"

"You, Sonto, are the chosen one. It is less a question of why you than why not you. You've been wanting to know why you, you've been trying so hard to find your gift," he emphasized that last part, "and all you've learned is…what?"

I stared back at him. "I *am* the gift. My *life* is the gift. All I can do is live my life because that is all anyone can do. I'm the one that Sanuse set on the road here. I'm the one who believed him. I took Ras as a lover –" I looked up just in time to catch Dwala's hair and eyes flash pink.

"Do not be alarmed. It is not what you think. It is only that you think of Ras every time you happen to notice my…er…attractiveness, and then you…well. Your scent becomes…er…stronger. But not in a bad way," he adds belatedly.

"You can smell me?" I said scrambling to my feet, mortified. I'd been sitting in front of this man allowing myself to dip in and out of memories of times spent with Ras –

"Oh!" I exclaimed, covering my mouth with my hands and turning away. I felt my hair tug away from my skull and groaned. How humiliating.

I heard Dwala chuckle and wished I had the power of invisibility or at least translocation. I would have given anything to be anywhere else right then.

"No, child. Not like that." His deep chuckle warmed me to my bones and I whirled around.

"What is that? Why am I so…? I do not like it."

"So sensitive? It's because of what happened to you yesterday and today. We are…closer. More…attuned. It is the same for me. It is not…romantic. But it is a bond. You'll feel something similar with Thuli. Who knows, you might develop the gift of mindpower."

I sagged in relief. I wasn't going mad. I wasn't imagining a…well, let's say a different kind of love. Something really had changed when I went into the water and spoke with Ma in her form as the Mother, though She must have cast a veil on my memory for I cannot remember anything except…music. And now that I was here speaking with Dwala, I was realising that I was different. My sensitivity to changes in his mood…I wasn't sure that I could live like that all day every day, especially if it was going to be him and Thuli. But –

"Mindpower? What's that?" I asked, suddenly remembering the last thing I'd heard him say.

"We do not use words to talk, in other realms. Communication is a lot more...organic."

"Hmm," I said. I would later, much later, come to learn about this organic communication but right then it was at the very bottom of my list of priorities.

"So you can smell me? What does that mean exactly?" I was reasonably confident now that I knew he wasn't talking about *eau de arousal.*

"If you pay attention, you can smell me too," he said, smiling.

I sniffed. Then I sniffed again. I concentrated and slowly inhaled. Beneath the salvia and the other scents that hung about the room there was…something else. Something warm and clean and…safe.

When I was a child, just before I went into school, so I must have been four or five, my mother's father poured gravel all over our backyard except in the garden proper. He left my mother's choumoellier and Monday's annual mealie patch alone. I hated that gravel. It hurt to walk on and meant I couldn't play outside. My mother had all but a tiny decorative section right in the middle of the yard removed, and then instead of trying to restore the lawn she had

concrete poured everywhere so although it was unusual at the time, our house had a paved yard. When I was older I asked her about that and she said my father was weak and had let my grandfather have his way in everything. That memory comes to me carried on wings of petrichor, the smell of new rain on hot gravel. It is the smell of thirsty land soaking up refreshing showers. Although gravel was not my friend the smell of rain always put me in mind of home. Dwala. The rock.

He stood in one smooth movement and placed his hand on my head. It was big, warm, and heavy, and the rain smell grew stronger.

"Sonto, daughter of Ekuthuleni. You must be like the land you belong to. You must be like the waters of the great rivers and oceans that bound your land. You must be like the rocks and stones that dot your land. You must be like water Sonto, adaptable and teachable, and you must be like stone, immovable from your chosen path."

I received it like a benediction.

Chapter 29

Sonto

I drank up the last bit of the herbal tonic Dwala had brought, and he warned me to rest. Nodding my thanks and agreeing to meet in the lounge later, I left isgodlo and walked out into the dazzling sunlight. I could hear the ocean and when I gazed out over it, stopping for a moment to wonder anew what had truly happened before I washed up on the beach, I felt a surge of recognition. It was not the difficult-to-resist pull I had felt earlier. This was something different. I cannot put into words – I know this because I have tried. It was an assurance that if I were to walk into the ocean it would hold me safe, always. I like to talk about the Mother in terms of a near-drowning but that is only because doing so makes it easier to avoid questions. Everyone wants to know about the mystical things that initiates live through, but no one wants to ask too many questions if they think they'll have to comfort you while you relive your trauma.

I write these words because I think one day someone will need to know this story, but a part of me is writing because it is important for me to remember.

After my conversation with Dwala I was eager to talk with Ras. I needed to talk to someone who would listen and not see an opportunity to teach in everything I said, or hear an invitation to tell a story in every question I asked. I wanted someone to listen to me for my own sake.

I made my way across the courtyard towards the room I shared with Ras, hoping I would not bump into Thuli.

My timing was off.

The sitting-room door opened and Thuli stepped out.

"Sonto, uvuka njani? I gather your vigil went well?" She was smiling as she approached and I smiled back. She wore a loose sheath, belted at the waist. Her hair was loose as Dwala's had been, falling in ringlets around her face. Her beauty was undeniable, she looked every bit the godling that she was. Her eyes held a new lilac light that I had not seen before, and as I greeted her, the same hue began to shimmer through her hair. In the bright morning sunlight the effect was undeniable. Her skin was dark-toned like ebony but the glow that emanated from it, visible even outdoors, gave her an ethereal quality that made it difficult to stop staring. Sonto-the-Other had been magnificent in her rainbow hues but Thuli took that magnificence to a whole new level. Her bare limbs shimmered and shone and

as her hair turned to white it seemed like she was enveloped in a light shadow, a full body halo one might say.

"Siyavuka Mkahosi, singabuza lina," I responded. "The vigil went well, I guess. Is that…water? I'm sorry if it's rude to ask."

She chimed her pretty laugh, the one that sounded like bells. "How sensitive you are. Yes, I have been told that it is the scent of water but I'm curious. What water, exactly? And what did you make of Dwala?"

I thought a moment and then decided to answer her second question first.

"Dwala is…wet rock. It's more than just rain, it's rain on stone. On rock. Izulu edwaleni. He is Dwala He-of-the-rock-indeed." I inhale again, slowly, deeply. "You are more like… the forest we walked through when we left the mountains. Lush. Fresh. Green. The water of…" I ponder. "The water of the forest. Why then is your name Thuli? That's not a very watery name."

Her smile widens and her hair becomes a bright, bright yellow. It is spectacular against her dark sun-kissed skin.

Do you know that feeling you get when you sit in afternoon sun on a chilly winter day? There were no winters eNjelele but I've lived through enough winters since then. Thuli feels like that when she is happy, like deliciously warm sunshine on your back, except on the inside.

"I'm named for my twin. Someone thought it would be smart to name me a derivative of his name. You know, because dust comes from rock, something like that." The shake of her head that follows this tells me that she does not think much of it.

"Still, it is my name and that's all there is to it. You are very special to say what you said about the forest."

I meet her eyes which are now their usual flat white. Her hair has arranged itself into thick, luscious jet-black curls that frame her face.

"So, how was your night?" She asks.

I have a feeling that she already knows.

"Are you asking because you do not know or because you want to hear what I will say?"

She laughs again and I join her. I am…happy. I know who I am. I know why I am here, and I know what to do next. I feel…light. Free.

"Will you come with me?" I ask her then.

We're not laughing any more but we're still at ease with each other, still smiling.

"I cannot. And anyway, you do not need me. And if you ever do, I will come. So you need not worry about…about seeing me again."

Thuli had welcomed me warmly on the beach and then she never had another smile for me till today. I think of this but it does not make me wish things had been otherwise. Everything happens the way that it should and it is good. Not always, perhaps, because let's face it, unpleasant things happen, but for the most part it is good.

After that I tell her that Dwala said we will all meet in the sitting-room later, and I watch her step regally away towards her own room. Not once has she invited me in there.

Chapter 30

Sonto and Ras

I approach the bedroom door and realize that my heart is pounding and turning on my heel, I walk instead to the luxe, all-white bathroom. I allow myself to savour the space as I take my shower. My time eNjelele is spent, who knows when I will have such luxury to bathe in again? I debate whether or not I should wash my hair and debate against it. I want to be with Ras but wet hair kind of dampens the mood.

There's a fresh tunic on the sink as there always is when I come out of the shower. I say a silent prayer of thanks to Ma for her provision, knowing that it is these little things that I will miss when I leave this place of magic. The fresh tunic is a light material, perhaps linen, something cool and natural.

Ras opens the door as I reach it. His dark eyes light up and he pulls me into a tight hug.

"Sonto wami," he says into my hair, enfolding me in a bear-hug. "I couldn't take it anymore, I was coming to look for you."

He smells like…he smells like he belongs to me. I lean into him and lick his neck, just a little. Just to…taste him. His sharp intake of breath triggers an answering tug deep in in my abdomen and my knees buckle as the tension leaves my body. My once-racing heart is calm but a new throbbing begins, softly and insistently between my legs. Hedonist.

Overcome with shyness I untangle myself from Ras's embrace and walk into the room. I need to think through what has happened. I am suddenly aware of how much time has elapsed, and yet how little. Was it really only yesterday morning that I went into the water for the first time? I know so much more than I did yesterday morning. I am a whole new person. I am in that liminal space between being and becoming, teetering on the edge of the ending of one thing and the beginning of another and far better thing.

"I know what I need to do," I say in a whisper. "And I need to know if you will come with me. If you will stay with me. I know you have a…a job here and –"

"My work is where you are. You have known this since we came together –" He glances at me and I look away, pressing my thighs together, hoping he doesn't notice.

The room is airy, and bright but it is also bare. I wish that there was something for me to handle to hide my emotion and mounting desire, but all there is is the wardrobe in the corner with nothing very interesting in it, the side-table under the window, and the bed I'm sitting on.

Ras crosses the room and stands before me. I'm not sure if my body is pulsing or throbbing. Air. I need air. "Would you get me some water please? I'm really thirsty."

"You haven't eaten since yesterday. Since the day before yesterday. Come. Let's get you fed. We can talk while we eat."

Reluctantly, I agree. Now that he has mentioned food I am ravenous. Taking me by the hand he leads me to the kitchen where we find a meal laid out. He serves me inkobe and I wolf everything down, chasing it with a mug of sweet, milky tea. The tastes of home. I eat everything but I don't eat indlubu. The maize kernels dried into ufutho, the peanuts, indumba (black beans not red), those are the inkobe ingredients that I like. There is not enough money in the world to pay me to put the floury texture of defeat that is indlubu into my mouth. Ras has a few bites but he doesn't eat much.

While we eat, I tell him everything that has happened since he left me to go herb-gathering the morning before.

Ras listens intently, asking questions when in my excitement I forget an illuminating detail. When I am done, he stands and pulls me into another embrace.

"You're not alone, Sonto," he says, his voice soothing. "We'll fight this together. We'll go to Big City, we'll go all over the country if we need too. We'll find your posse…er, coven…er, sect…" He clears his throat.

I can't help him because I don't know what the correct term is either.

"We'll find your people. I gotchu," he says, which makes me smile.

And then he kisses me. Long and deep and sure.

I look up at him, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. "I'm sorry I gave you a hard time for being Yster. You know we'll have to deal with that, don't you? The real world isn't like here."

"You wish you gave me a hard time," he says, giving me a squeeze. "You never stood a chance. You've been mine since I saw you snoring on that bench in Sinyoka."

The laughter bubbles up all the more intense for being unexpected. "Snoring? Me? How dare you?"

Still laughing we make our way back to our room.

"Thank you, Ras," I say, as he gestures for me to walk in first. "I'm thankful for you. I don't know what I'd do without you." I feel a little awkward but it needed to be said.

Ras smiles and brushes a strand of my thick black hair away from my face. I left it loose after my shower and I can feel it doing what I assume to be strange and marvellous things.

"You don't have to do anything alone. We're in this together."

The day wore on as we talked, made plans, and drew closer together. We started out seated on the bed side by side, then lying side by side, then I was between Ras's legs, lying with my back against his chest while he half sat up against the bedframe.

Our lovemaking, when it finally happened, was sweet. It was passionate and it was intense. Ras exclaimed when my eyes turned a golden hue but I didn't want to hear it.

Hedonist.

"I think we are in for interesting times, and I don't mean that in the fun way."

I am lying sated in the circle of his arms because what I have called our lovemaking was him bringing me to the brink over and over until I was crying his name, begging him to give me release. He knew just how to touch me, how to make me feel alive. In this moment everything feels right.

"Dwala called me a hedonist," I continue. "I think that's license to indulge, don't you? There'll be time enough for self-denial when we're walking to Big City." I groan at the thought of this. I try to remember the geography of Central Republic. We're on the eastern coast now. To get to Big City we have to go north.

"We won't walk," Ras says. "We're driving."

"Driving what?" I ask, incredulous.

"A car, of course. We'll be going to the capital city. We can't show up destitute, it would put you at a disadvantage. The Yster understand money above all else. It's not like Ekuthuleni and definitely not like Sinyoka."

"You've never been to Ekuthuleni. How do you know? We had cars too. It's just that when…you know, when those things happened and Big City stopped fuel supplies to the Wester towns, most of them reverted to a way of living that wasn't so…mechanical. So…"

"So urban? Wester became more rural? I know. That's what I'm talking about. And I have been to Wester, including Ekuthuleni. There is nowhere on this land that I have not been searching for you. There is nowhere you can go that I will not find you."

Now it's his turn to be awkward. I let him have the moment.

"You obviously didn't find me," I say, pretending to pout.

"Do you really believe that we were in Sinyoka at the same time *by accident*?"

As we lay in each other's arms, our bodies entwined, I am at peace. I know that the road ahead is fraught with danger. I know that I am still *persona non grata* to the Others. But I also know what my next step is. Go to Big City. Find any remaining healers – besides Nona in Sinyoka I know from Thuli and Dwala that there are none in Wester. Once I find my coven…take down the Others and do what it takes to make Central Republic healthy again, to rid it of this sickness. It is a daunting prospect. I am only a girl about to cross the country with her lover.

"I wonder if I can find out what happened to Sanuse after he disappeared."

"Don't call him that." Ras's speech is slurring and I realise that I have been lost in thought so long that he is beginning to doze off.

"Fine. I wonder what happened to the Yeoman. Do you think he's still alive? And why are you so tired, anyway? You slept soundly I'm sure, and you haven't…I mean you didn't…" I lapse into silence, painfully aware of the trap I have set for myself.

Moving slowly and purposefully, Ras pushes me back onto the bed and covers my body with his own.

"I haven't done…what?" He nips at the tender skin below my ear and I yelp.

I like it.

"What have I not…done?" This time he bites. Firmly. The effect is electric. I gasp.

Long, long minutes later he is drifting off, just like I am.

I feel a sense of purpose, and peace. I know who I am. I know what I am to do. And I do not have to do it alone. Maybe one day I will go to Ekuthuleni and sit the ritual of mourning for my parents but for now I must carry on to fulfil the purpose for which I left my home. Part of it is done – I know the who and the why – now I travel north to decide what I'm going to do about it. I will find that coven and do as Ma leads, and I will get justice for my parents and the people of Ekuthuleni. I worry as I write this that it is too pat, too cliched, but then I think about everything I have recounted so far, everything that I have put down and the evidence I have given so that no one may say that these things did not happen.

***

I hear Thuli and Dwala walking across the courtyard toward the sitting room. I have just woken up from a dreamless nap to find Ras still asleep, still enclosing me in his arms. It is a good place to be, this. The world may be falling apart and I may be on the precipice of

more life-changing adventure, but this is a good place to be. I will mourn my parents, I will. For now Big City and vengeance call my name. That must come first. Oh yes indeed. A sense of peace washes over me. The world may be falling apart, but in this moment, with Ras beside me, everything feels right. Thuli and Dwala can wait.

Epilogue

A whirling wind shakes the leaves from their trees. I watch, pen in hand. I am tired but I do not give up, I do not stop, I merely…pause. The notebooks give me a sense of urgency. The whispered encouragement of those I have gathered around me or, to be more precise, those who have chosen to come alongside me…all of it weighs on me. I think often of what might have been, could have been, should have been, might still be, and what is, and I think to myself, What a lot of work there is to be done still.

I must write because I must not allow silence and ignorance to swallow us as they have done in the past, relegating us – the Wester – to minor details and inconvenient, obscure references in the pages of history. If nothing else, someone must read these words if only to pass on the fact that everyone doesn't need salvia, impepho isn't for everyone. I don't know; I think that's something that should be more widely known. I write because I think things would have been easier for me if someone had told me the stories I needed when I needed to hear them, not after the fact as so often happened.

The happenings in the heavens are writ large in our world, in our skies and in the visions of those who *see* and the dreams of those who *dream*. For those who know how to listen, Ma is everywhere. No matter how tiny the whisper, they say it will always reach the ears of its intended, even if he or she be generations before or later. This story of the beginning will find those for whom it is intended, and do what it is supposed to do.

My name is Sonto, they call me the Last Witchling, they call me Umhambuma, the Wanderer. I am Sonto, a daughter of Ekuthuleni, and this is the story of how it all began.

THE END

Before I Die:

Reflections on Writing, Womanhood, and Personal Power

An accompaniment to the novel *Like Water Like Stone*

Introduction

Like Water Like Stone began as an exploration of very particular dreams I was having around 2014 and into 2015 that featured an unknown, unnamed girl of indeterminate age. I began writing down these dreams as a personal exercise. Besides the girl's presence, however, the dreams seemed to have nothing in common and differed in setting and themes. Sometimes she was in the present-day world, in a bar, flirting. Sometimes I saw her as a child, enjoying the things of childhood. As I continued to document these dreams, I began to weave a narrative around them, creating a world in which these dream events were taking place. The dreams were neither frequent nor numerous, but they were compelling enough that I continued developing this narrative partly because I was fascinated by this unnamed girl and partly because I found that I quite enjoyed visiting her world.

I began typing up these dreams-become-stories and sometimes writing them down on paper; I had files named 'Sonto' on every electronic device I own. I applied for the Creative Writing Masters in 2015 and I decided that this girl's story would be the story I would tell. All I had to do (I thought) was name her, locate her in time and space, and give her a *raison d'etre*. I did not continue dreaming about the girl I named Sonto, though I continued to develop her story. Therefore I feel it would be inaccurate to claim that *Like Water Like Stone* is completely a product of my dreams. It originates there, yes, but the work is so much than *the stuff of dreams.* This essay and this paper are about what it is, as exactly as I can manage. This paper is about why and how I made the narrative choices I did, and the themes that I hope are depicted by my writing of Sonto's story. In brief: *Like Water Like Stone* is a novel about a girl named Sonto and this paper is about that attempt to tell a very particular story and some of the things I learned and tried to learn in the process.

In its very early stages *Like Water Like Stone* was conceptualized as a blend of magical realism and fantasy. When I first began thinking about the essay and writing a proposal for it, I thought that I would use it to talk about magical realism and fantasy and where my work sits in relation to those two genres and the boundary between them. I will discuss this in a later section of the essay. Further on I will discuss the matter of genre as it relates to *Like Water Like Stone*.

Fantasy stories are set in a world or worlds other than the one we live in, that have been created by the author. The world-building is part of what defines the genre. For

example in a series such as *The Wheel of Time* (Jordan, 1993), *The Sword of Truth* (Goodkind, 1998) and *Discworld* (Pratchett, 2013), the latter which I reference elsewhere in this paper as an example of fantasy (Goodkind, 1998; Pratchett, 2013). *Discworld* interests me because, besides being a fantasy series, it is also an allegory for real-world issues such as freedom of the press, exercise of agency, and human rights among other broad themes (Pratchett, 2013).

Magical realism, on the other hand, is what happens when this world as we know it is invaded by elements of magic or the supernatural but in such a way that these are more or less accepted and not necessarily problematic or fantastical (Streecher, 1999). For notable examples, the works of Haruki Murakami, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende are recommended.

The paper *Magical Realism in One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Geetha states: "The extraordinary events and characters are fabricated. However, the message that Marquez intends to deliver explains a true history" (2010). Later in this paper I will describe how I perceive my own work in relation to genre and the factors that influenced my choice to define the creative work as Africanjujuist rather than Magical Realist, where Africanjujuism is defined by American-Nigerian author Nnedi Okarafor as a subgenre of Fantasy, which is itself a subgenre of Speculative Fiction.

Another issue that will help illuminate what I hope to achieve with the creative work relates to setting. In thinking about this, I found that in the case of my work the question of genre is so closely tied to the question of setting that separating the two becomes an exercise in futility, as the setting is influenced by the genre in which the story came to me, and the genre is itself influenced by setting. The mythology of the story world contributes to the 'fantastical' elements of the story and in that way genre and setting are closely linked and will be examined in tandem.

The world of Ekuthuleni (Place of Peace) is fictional, though based on real-world geography and history. The cultures, myths and fables that are included or referenced in the story are southern African, as is the flora and fauna. I desired to create a world that would be familiar to a southern African audience; I think on some level I wanted people who know the places and things I name to say, 'Hey, I know that place/myth/herb,' because as a reader I become very excited when I can recognise myself in the stories I'm reading, and I wanted to write a story that I did not see often – one that centred Nguni cosmology and southern Africa

and also excluded white men. Not centering white men was in no way a conscious decision at the time of writing, they just have nothing to do with this part of the story.

I also examine the narrative choices I made concerning my protagonist's expressions of womanhood, sexuality, and power. I am reminded here of a conversation I had several years ago with a compatriot of mine, author NoViolet Bulawayo. We spoke of many things to do with our shared birthplace, the politics therein, and the responsibility of artists, specifically writers. One of the things she said and which I have never forgotten was this: *all writing is personal.* Sonto, the protagonist of *Like Water Like Stone* (*LWLS*), struggles with the idea of being 'the chosen one' and finds herself unable to act or move forward because she is unsure of the legitimacy of her 'role' despite the assurances of her mentors and lover. It is only when she commits to authenticity – with herself and those around her – about her desires, dreams, and goals – that she achieves the desired trance state that begins the final action of the story. Prior to that, Sonto is doing what is set before her by others – first by Sanuse, the village wise-man, then by her mentors Dwala and Thuli, but when she decides on a course of action and acts according to her decision, she finds internal peace and the will and courage to act in service of her own interests.

As a writer, it took me a long time to bring Sonto to the point of action and I believe that this is very much a result of my own unsettledness. The ruminating and musings of this period revolved around what I would need to do to separate narrator's voice from authorial voice and separate both from character voice. I did not know that this was a question until I had to answer it, and that was the beginning of many lessons that I am still learning about the challenges and the truths of producing a novel-length creative work in prose. I would like to say that I resolved both Sonto's crisis and my own with an inspirational writerly flourish and with the questions I had/have about writing as craft answered, but that would be untrue. One question in particular has consumed my journey from the start of the project to its completion and that has been the question of my own relationship to Sonto, the protagonist, given that she came to life out of my dreams. I have written a creative work that came straight out of consciousness. Over and above being the creature to my role as creator, Sonto is also a part of me, one that I rendered weak by my denial of the nature of that which connects us, and one that I found grew stronger of voice the more I accepted that she is a fractal of me. I shall delve deeper into this at a later point in this reflective essay. In that section I will discuss how, despite being formally unschooled on the subject of voice, I

nonetheless found a path through the wild lands of writer's voice, narrative voice, and character voice.

On Genre and Setting

The geography of Sonto's world draws largely from the geography of southern Africa, in particular the Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe, where I grew up, and the villages and towns located there, and the east coast of South Africa which provided, loosely, the template on which eNjelele is based. ENjelele is, for the amaNdebele, a name given to a holy, sacred place, especially one used as a communal shrine. I based the history of Ekuthuleni on that region – Matabeleland North, Zimbabwe – and also drew from the pre-colonial history of southern Africa as it relates to iLemba uShaka (popularized as King Shaka Zulu). The context of Sonto's story particularly references the post-independence war which broke out in Zimbabwe (1984-87), which is documented in history books, government-approved sources, as well as in records kept by The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, Amnesty International, and other human rights watchdogs.

For the purposes of storytelling however, I did not only rely on official records but also on anecdotal accounts and my own memories of that period of Zimbabwe's history. I was six years old in 1987 when the Unity Accord that ended the civil war was signed. Despite being very young at the time, there are incidents I remember, as well as conversations I overheard (eavesdropping on adult conversations) and participated in (as I grew older) that have informed my choice to not rely on government sources for information about that time. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) notes in its 1997 report:

"While the suffering caused by colonial rule is widely documented and internationally recognised, **the suffering in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the 1980s is a history that is unknown except to those who experienced it at first hand**." [emphasis my own]. The report further states: "It is also apparent that while the signing of the Unity accord in December 1987 was an important step towards national reconciliation in Zimbabwe, **there nonetheless remains in rural Matabeleland a deep-seated mistrust of the Government, and a fear that events of the 1980s could be repeated in the future**." [emphasis my own].

The CCJZP Report referenced above is easily available online. It appears thorough and detailed, and uses records kept and research done by the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe dating back to 1972 when the Commission was established. The report was presented to the government that was in power at the time and makes two main recommendations: the first being for the state to fund the rehabilitation and support needed for Gukurahundi victims, and the second being the removal from office of those who ordered the violence that rocked Matabeleland and the Midlands in the early-to-late 1980s. Gukurahundi refers to the period of state-sponsored violence that beset the south and south-west of Zimbabwe; the term is explained fully later in this text. There has never been an official acknowledgement of the atrocities of Gukurahundi to date and this has contributed, in my view, to the maintenance of tense relationships between Zimbabwe's dominant population groups namely maShona and amaNdebele. It seems to me an unreasonable expectation to hope that something that impacted a collective psyche as deeply as Gukurahundi has done in both Matabeleland provinces and in the Midlands province, should remain shrouded in silence. I believe that Zimbabweans can unite towards a common goal, and I believe that for this unity to be sustainable and positive it should be based on trust. The deep mistrust of government by people in Matabeleland and Midlands means that this cannot happen unless the matter of Gukurahundi is addressed in a way that affirms victims' experiences as well as those of their families' and communities'. *Like Water Like Stone* is partially intended to do that, to get Zimbabweans – and Africans in general – talking about the ethnic tensions that handicap African politics. The fictional conflict between the Wester and the Yster in *Like Water Like Stone* is a microcosm of this historic, unhealed, and officially unacknowledged real-world rift in present-day Zimbabwean politics. This tension is well-documented by civic research groups, by ecumenical groups, NGOs and by Zimbabweans themselves.

There has been very little government will to address the legacy and negative anti-nation-building impact of Gukurahundi. A leading cause of the breakdown of reconciliation attempts has been the presence of key players in decision-making positions when it is well-accepted that one cannot be both player and referee or defendant and judge. ZPF leaders (the ruling party of Zimbabwe from 1984-87 when Gukurahundi occurred) have variously said that they were not aware of what was happening in Matabeleland during the Gukurahundi era. Or have pointed the finger of blame at then-President Mugabe and his cabinet. The Chihambakwe Commission of Inquiry of 1983 was established to determine the

truth of Gukurahundi and to report on allegations of mass killings in Matabeleland. This commission was created by President Robert Mugabe and chaired by Zimbabwean Judge Simplisius Chihambakwe. The suppression of reports into Gukurahundi and anecdotal evidence of ZPF-sponsored backlash illuminates some of my own thinking around the narrative choices made to keep the story-telling conventions of fiction and creativity that allowed me to write a story that is purely imaginary despite being located in a real historical and geographical location.

I found the novel-writing and the intellectual discourse that accompanied it truly liberating and affirming. As a student in the Creative Writing Master's at Wits University, I found that the programme gave me structure, time, and much-needed encouragement to pursue the questions that interested me in a way that excited me – through writing, through the crafting and rendering of story. Ultimately I came to an understanding of my own inter-connected identities – female, Ndebele, and Zimbabwean – in a way that allowed me to explore and excavate my history and to re-imagine and write a story about what might have happened 'if things had been different.'

Some of the people I spoke with, familiar with the history of amaNdebele of Zimbabwe, considered the 'What if?' questions I was asking to be anarchic. Others warned me to beware the wrath of the state. I was not insensitive to what they meant and I myself chose vehicles that – I hoped – would give me the protection of plausible deniability should "the state" ever take an interest in my work. This sounds far-fetched to anyone who did not grow up with memories of 'Seligonjolozelwe'.

Seligonjolozelwe means 'You are surrounded' in isiNdebele. It was an announcement of army activity in the area and meant that until they had completed their task, no one could be on the streets, and entry and exit from whatever neighbourhood that they were surrounding was prohibited. It was not until I was an adult that I found out that my father was politically active at that time, and had left politics after one search targeted our home. Neither my father nor my mother ever spoke to me about that time or their experiences of it. Piecing my memories together and stitching them into a coherent tale with the accounts of family members and others with whom I have spoken has led me to a greater understanding of the collective recalcitrance to talk about that war and the events that surround it in any great detail.

One of my family's housekeepers had what I now know to be a panic attack when one of my father's friends visited our home and for a reason I do not know decided to knock on the door with a pistol and point it at her when she opened the door. He was suitably apologetic over his prank-gone-wrong, but looking back on that incident brought to mind her stories about what men bearing arms had done in her village in Kezi, Matabeleland North. The Catholic Commission Report (1997) states: "January 1983: The 5 Brigade is deployed in Matabeleland North. Reports of atrocities begin. These 'atrocities' continued for four years until 1987, with the 5 Brigade withdrawn for retraining and redeployed at certain intervals. The 5 Brigade was a special army unit trained by North Korean instructors to 'combat dissidents.'" The dissidents were the demobilised fighters who had gone to war for the country's independence, and upon independence, were considered by the ZANLA forces as political rivals. Joshua Nkomo, leader of the ZIPRA forces, was extremely popular and Robert Mugabe saw in this popularity a threat to his exercise of power.

Mugabe's answer to his problem in Matabeleland was code-named 'Gukurahundi', a Shona word meaning 'the rain that washes away the chaff'. It was clear from the events that followed and from various quotes attributed to Mugabe that the people of Matabeleland, and the soldiers who came from that region, were the chaff that had to be washed away by cleansing rain which came in the form of the North Korean-trained 5th Brigade. Emmerson Mnangagwa, Minister of State Security during the period, said in a local newspaper, *The Chronicle*: "Blessed are they who will follow the path of the Government laws, for their days on earth will be increased. But woe unto those who will choose the path of collaboration with dissidents for we will certainly shorten their stay on earth (*The Chronicle*, 1983)." Mnangagwa is currently the President of Zimbabwe, and has not been called to account for the violence, murder and trauma that was committed during his tenure as Minister of State Security.

This is only one example of many things said by government officials during and after Gukurahundi that contributed to the culture of silence around the events of Gukurahundi, which continued up until relatively recently. Fiction is now breaking that silence coming out of Bulawayo (Matabeleland's capital city and second largest city of Zimbabwe), such as *House of Stone* by Novuyo Rosa Tshuma (2020) and *The Theory of Flight* by Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu (2021), both of which deal with that period, albeit in different ways. An examination of those texts is beyond the scope of this essay; they are mentioned only to demonstrate that

Like Water Like Stone is not alone in using that period of Zimbabwe's history as source material.

In his preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire shares an anecdote from a discussion he took part in during his time in political exile from his home country of Brazil. He relates how, in a discussion about whether the change in worldview resulting from political education would lead to mental collapse or fanaticism, one participant responded:

"I can say one thing – when I began this course I was naive, and when I found out how naive I was, I started to get critical. But this discovery hasn't made me a fanatic, and I don't feel any collapse either."

My own experience has been similar. When I entered the programme, I was naïve, but because of what the programme demanded in tandem with the roles and responsibilities of being a single working mother trying to write, I became conscientized to the systems of political, social, economic, sexist, and racist oppression and silencing. One of the early conflicts between my work and my burgeoning politics was thus around the naming of places and characters in the story. I made the choices I made to fictionalize certain aspects of history and cloak the setting by inventing a fantasy world, all of which begs the question: Why would Zimbabwe's government (read: the ruling party, ZANU-PF) care what an unknown student writes? According to Peleg (1993) censorship is defined as "the systematic control of content by a government through various means." For Zimbabweans this has meant that all forms of art have been vulnerable to state interference and risk being banned should they be perceived as counter to government attitudes. A popular Bulawayo artist known personally to me had his exhibition banned and he himself was arrested and spent five nights in custody because of his exhibition, titled *Sibathontisele*. The exhibition profiled the Gukurahundi atrocities and the name Sibathontisele, translated as 'Let's Drip on Them,' is a reference to the torture method popularised by the 5th Brigade which involved dripping melting plastic onto victims' bodies. Owen Maseko, the creator of Sibathontisele is on record saying, "There are mass graves in our country. If people are to move on, they need to rebury their brothers, sisters and mothers in peace" (*The Guardian*, 2010). Sibathontisele remains banned in Zimbabwe.

Cont Mhlanga, who passed on in 2022, was one of Bulawayo's most prominent dramaturgists. He was known for being outspoken about Gukurahundi and as a

result was also known to be a person of interest to government intelligence agencies, proved by the banning of his work in 1986 and his arrest in 2006.

These examples are provided here to support my assertion that calling attention to Gukurahundi, to tensions along ethnic lines, and to be in any way opposed to the ruling party is not a matter to be taken lightly.

Further evidence for this assertion lies in the fact that ZANU-PF uses state machinery to erase, silence or omit histories that are deemed dangerous – not because they present a threat to Zimbabwe's citizens but because of the threat they present to those who rule. Historian Terence Ranger calls this 'patriotic history' (Ranger, 2004). This patriotic history is understood to be the sanitised and state-approved history that does not run counter to anything the state, and specifically, in the case of Zimbabwe, anything that ZANU-PF, does not sanction. This was summed up in 2011 in the words of the then-Principal Director in the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, Reverend Damasane, and quoted in *Vhutuza*, 2017. He said:

"You cannot wish censorship away, because it is impossible. It will not be achieved that you work without censorship. Every country will censor its citizenry, including Zimbabwe … where there is a possibility of conflict between an arts product and the state, there shall be control." (*Vhutuza*, 2011)

As a woman belonging to an oppressed minority (amaNdebele) and an economically impoverished majority (Black in southern Africa), I recognize that my struggle against oppression is tripartite: against sexism, against racism, and against classism. My goal was to write a story that consciously and conscientiously did two things: de-centred men and de-centred whiteness, but in the process of writing, I discovered a third goal: to centre amaNdebele of Zimbabwe in a way that affirmed and honoured that ethnic group.

I wanted a story in which I could see my idealized self. I wanted a story of agency, victory, liberation, and power. I wanted delicious sexual exploration and intellectual rigour in the women I wrote about. I wanted men who worshiped the women they loved as I had been conditioned to think they should: thank you Hollywood and 'chick lit'. I wanted powerful magic that halted oppression wherever it was found, freed the enslaved, and delivered a rich cosmology in which I could see the threads that tie me to the history of my home, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, an ancient kingdom. I wanted the guidance of otherworldly beings granting wisdom, knowledge, and power. I wanted sweeping story arcs and escapism. I wanted happy endings with a side of romance. I wanted women protagonists choosing

themselves. I've read a lot of Western fantasy and I wanted my culture to be the frame for this, my own fantasy. I wanted to continue enjoying fantasy as a literary genre but most of all, I wanted to write exactly that kind of story.

It seemed to me that the dreams were calling me to write a story that named recognisable structures of power and domination and that also identified avenues to freedom, agency, and empowerment. The history of my people is one fraught with danger, mayhem, violence, and the subterfuge often practised by those who must live in denial of their truths if they are to live at all. While that history is beyond the scope of this essay, its impact on current approaches to political discourse was a significant consideration in the writing of *Like Water Like Stone*.

One of the writers I read whose words also gave me motivation to proceed is Yvonne Vera. Vera, who, like myself, was born and raised in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, was born in 1964, the same year that the second war for Zimbabwe's liberation began (the Second Chimurenga war) and grew up through the anti-colonial struggle. I was born in 1981, two years before Gukurahundi. Vera is one of Bulawayo's icons and her writing reflects the time in which she grew up. The challenges of women's empowerment have long been a theme in Zimbabwean writing as evidenced by novels such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga, 1988) and Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (Hove, 1988). Similar to her contemporaries, Vera's writing is also critical of state-sanctioned oppression and deeply concerned with patriarchy in both colonial and post-colonial governments (Hungwe, 2019). As a writer attempting to occupy a similar space, I resonated deeply with Vera's claim that she sought to communicate an "intuitive" understanding of her country's past. Her comparison of her role as writer to conduit of ancestral and spiritual wisdom also resonated with me: "[Nehanda was written] almost intuitively, out of my consciousness of being African, as though I were myself a spirit medium […] I wrote it from remembrance, as a witness to my own spiritual history" (Vera in Bryce, 2002).

Finally, as a woman, Vera's words on writing continue to inspire me:

"If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for women – much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction. The written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation of a world, its proposals, its individual characters, its suspension of disbelief. It surprises in the best carnival way, reducing distances, accepting the least official stance. The book is bound, circulated,

read. It retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation. Writing offers a moment of intervention (1999)."

At the start of this writing journey, I had set *Like Water Like Stone* in the past. This was not something I gave much thought to until I realised, and others pointed out, that a reading of the work did not give the idea of the past but rather of the future. Instead of agonizing over whether *LWLS* is set in the past or the future I decided, in the name of staying true to the story, to let the reader make that determination for themselves, simply because I felt that the story was both past and future and a reimagining of both depending on one's perspective. When the dreams first came to me, there was nothing to indicate Sonto's age or the historical era in which she was located. When I began using Gukurahundi as the backdrop it seemed natural that the story would be set in the past, yet feedback from readers and supervisors indicated that this was not the case. I made a conscious decision to trust my readers and the story. Those who chose to read it as set in a reimagined past were free to do so, and those who understood it as a reimagining of a future would not be wrong either. It was a question that others found fascinating but one which I myself found irrelevant. This is not a history of Zimbabwe, it is a fictionalized telling of a story based on true historical events, by a Zimbabwean.

African literature is a vast and diverse body of work covering a wide range of topics, cultures, and styles. It can be difficult to define what exactly constitutes African literature and once defined as African, it can be difficult to place individual works in the genres defined by literary scholars, critics, and even publishers. African literature often draws from traditional oral stories, but it also includes contemporary works that are written in different languages and styles. Many African writers explore themes of identity, colonialism, racism, and the effects of globalization. African literature also often has a strong sense of place and culture, reflecting the diverse countries and cultures of the African continent. While some works focus on particular regions or countries, others explore pan-African themes and ideas. In addition, contemporary African literature often features strong female characters and vivid depictions of African life. Taken as a whole, African literature is complex, captivating, and often highly political.

The prominence of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Magical Realism genres as tools to speak about power, oppression, and the travails of the marginalized against dominance is well-established. Less well-established is the case for Blackness in narratives belonging to

these genres. When I began this writing journey, I first called my work Fantasy because of the supernatural elements, and then Magical Realism when I learned the difference between that and Fantasy. Currently, I believe that my work is more Africanjujuist than anything else and reject both Fantasy and Magical Realism as descriptors. Magical Realism is inextricably linked to Latin American literature, but African literature is not a derivative of Latin American literature and thus it would be inappropriate to categorize it thus (Britannica, n.d.)[1]. Naming African literature according to a tradition that is not largely understood to be African ignores the fact that, as Riach (2020) puts it, "magical realism's defining features have always been present in African orature and writing." As Zakes Mda stated in his Olive Schreiner Prize acceptance speech for his novel *Ways of Dying*, "…the Latin-Americans have nothing to do with my work. First of all, they did not invent the mode of magic realism. They merely popularized it. (Mda, 1997)"

Nnedi Okorafor has coined the terms *Africanfuturism* and *Africanjujuism* to define particular subsets of Science Fiction and Fantasy. In her own words:

> "I am an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist. Africanfuturism is a sub-category of Science Fiction. Africanjujuism is a subcategory of Fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative (Okorafor, 2019)."

I did not set out to write like Nnedi Okarafor, and in fact, I have a horror story about following a suggestion to read her work while I was in the midst of producing my own. In 2016, I read *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okarafor (2010) on the recommendation of my then-supervisor. He suggested this text and another, *Nwelezelanga: The Star Child* by Unathi Magubeni, because he wanted me to see how other contemporary writers were dealing with similar subject matter, that is, the trope of 'The Chosen One' and elements of magic in a real-world setting. I read the two recommended texts and promptly put away my own work because I was convinced of two things: the story I wanted to tell had already been told, and more skilfully than I could hope to tell it. It took me a very long time to overcome the resulting writer's block.

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[1] https://www.britannica.com/art/magic-realism. The term magic realism is a relatively recent designation, first applied in the 1940s by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, who recognized this characteristic in much Latin-American literature. Some scholars have posited that magic realism is a natural outcome of postcolonial writing, which must make sense of at least two separate realities—the reality of the conquerors as well as that of the conquered. Prominent among the Latin-American magic realists are the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, the Brazilian Jorge Amado, the Argentines Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar, and the Chilean Isabel Allende.

The impact of reading *Who Fears Death* and *Nwelezelanga* persisted until a friend – who shall remain unnamed as per her request – suggested I read *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2015). We had had many conversations about the story I wanted to write and just as many if not more conversations about why I wasn't taking up the Master's again and completing the project. Reading *Big Magic* was an important factor of my returning to the masters programme and to Sonto's story, and this quote was particularly impactful: "Your fear will always be triggered by your creativity, because creativity asks you to enter into realms of uncertain outcome, and fear hates uncertain outcome" (Gilbert, 2015).

When I came back to the project after a four-year hiatus, I resolved that, for the duration of the course, my reading would exclude anything that fell anywhere under the umbrella of African Speculative Fiction. I made peace with the 'uncertain outcome' of writing *LWLS* by putting aside all thought of what will happen after I write it and focusing instead on writing the best story I could. I no longer worried about inadvertent plagiarism as I did after *Who Fears Death*. I worried instead, among other things, about how best to create a world that would be a vehicle for the story I wanted to tell. I chafed to have the heroic tales of amaNdebele upgraded from the status of myth and so I was overjoyed to discover Nnedi Okorafor talking about 'blending existing spiritual cosmologies with the imaginative' to create fiction that she then called Africanjujuism.

Like Water Like Stone is classified (by the author) as an Africanjujuist novel because it is a story that depicts everyday African scenes located within a particular cosmology and history. Similar to Western Fantasy, which often draws from medieval European history, *LWLS* includes details of recognisable rituals and ways of seeing an African world. Thanks to the hegemony of Western mythologies, these textures are familiar to non-Western readers. I wanted to write a story whose elements would be as familiar to southern African readers as the tropes in fantasy are to readers of popular Western fantasy. I am thus an Africanjujuist writer in the tradition of Nnedi Okarafor by virtue of having written a story that "centres and highlights African realities and combines these with imagination and creativity" (Okorafor, 2019) . In a similar vein I sought to write a story that would be specifically concerned with and rooted in the stories, histories, culture, and perspectives of the Nguni people of southern Africa, their lives and realities and their connections to the 'outside' world.

I did not set out to write an Africanjujuist novel, because when I began, I had not come across Okorafor's writings on the subject of genre. In recent months, when I was thinking

about this essay and looking into how I would tackle the question of genre, I came across and felt affirmed by and aligned with Okorafor's definition.

Writers are made by other writers, and I ended up picking as my "writing godfather" a writer who was neither Black nor a woman, but an old white man (old by the time I discovered him). His books struck me so fiercely that I re-read many of them multiple times and still re-read them to this day. That writer was Terry Pratchett, whose influence on my life as a writer and a thinker is one I am still trying to name.

In moments of self-doubt, I turned to the work of Sir Terry Pratchett, so unlike my own and yet very much like it in the ways that matter to me. It is the idea that self-expression should not be limited provided it does not limit anyone else's self-expression that is the most appealing of Pratchett's themes.

Terry Pratchett's work largely rests upon his emphasis on personal power, on the individual's right to decide for themselves how they want to navigate the world, and their right to do so without hindrance from family, society, or government. We see several of Pratchett's characters doing just that: Eskarina Smith (Equal Rites), for example, is a young girl who wants to be a wizard in spite of the fact that on the Discworld, wizarding is reserved for males and women who wish to practise magic can only be witches. The Watch Books (i.e. those books featuring the City Watch – Night Watch, Feet of Clay and others) are filled with characters who transcend the roles that society and species have pre-determined for them. Cheery, a dwarf, signs up for the City Watch and uses that positionality to further expand her agency and to express her femaleness and her femininity. She does this despite the fact that in Pratchett's world, Dwarves frown upon sex and gender expression. She continues to do so despite the negative response she receives from her own kind.

In my view, the Discworld novels are works of sheer genius, especially considering the time in which they were written. This is not to say that Pratchett's handling of human and non-white characters is beyond criticism. I read certain books of the Discworld several times without once feeling that I as an African Black woman was represented at all (once I thought about it) and that realization made me think a lot more deeply about what I loved about the Discworld and what I brought from that world into my own writing.

Pratchett's multiple worlds are more than 'mere fantasy' because he makes us question things we thought of as settled, such as who can do what and who cannot, and over and above

that he makes us – or rather, me – think deeply about what it means to be a storyteller. Pratchett's seeming madness assures me of my right to choose what and whom I want to be in the world, a storyteller who uses story to make a points about agency and power and responsibility, especially personal responsibility.

On Womanhood and Personal Power

I hold it self-evident that so long as we live in a man's world, as we still do, women have a right to create enclaves of learning or work where, instead of obeying or imitating what men do and want, women can shape what they do, how they do it, and why they do it, in their own way and on their own terms.

- Ursula K. Le Guin (2019)

The words of the late Canadian seminal writer Ursula le Guin quoted above are an acknowledgement of the fact that it is a man's world, a fact that has been discussed and dissected in academic treatises, scholarly endeavour, as well as by laypeople in blogs, articles, books, and other resources. That the world is patriarchal is not in dispute, and while this includes Africa, the origins and manifestations of patriarchy are not the main point of this section. What I intend to do here is provide a woman-centric backdrop for *Like Water Like Stone*, in particular for the actions and decision-making of the protagonist Sonto.

Black womanhood is an important and ever-timely topic in various academic spheres ranging from discourse and research in arts and the sciences, in media, in economic theory, in public health, in development theory, to anything and everything in between. I believe it is essential to explore the experiences that uniquely affect Black women in southern Africa as they have often been left out of the narrative and their stories are often overlooked by society at large. Nigerian bestselling author, Chimamanda Adichie, addresses this in an essay titled "The Danger of a Single Story", wherein she posits that the hegemony of the west in literary discourse has coloured even Africans' own perceptions of what it is to be African and in particular an African woman. She says:

[My roommate] felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans

being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals. (Adichie, 2009)

This assumed positionality of Africa and Africanness as needing pity and lacking agency is contrary to what I know to be true about my community – whether that be the continent at large or my countries of residence and citizenship – and the people around me in everyday life. In writing *Like Water Like Stone*, I was firmly established in my womanism, and I hoped to write a story that would reflect man-woman and woman-world relationships not as ones in which women are adversarial towards men and the world but in which women are seen to exercise agency and, where necessary, partner with men towards common, positive goals.

WOMANIST

1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

– Alice Walker's Definition of a "Womanist" (1983)

Whether one ascribes to Hudson-Weems' (2004) Africana Womanism or Alice Walker's (1983) womanism as defined above, what they have in common and what appeals to me is the inclusivity of both theories. Unlike mainstream feminism which has often excluded Black women and their experiences, womanism is focused solely on the unique challenges faced by

Black women and seeks to create the enclaves such as those mentioned by Le Guin (2019), enclaves in which they can thrive.

Identifying as a southern African woman and raised on a very Western-centric media diet when it comes to music, movies, television, and novels, I believe that it is not only essential but imperative to explore and document the lives and experiences of southern African women and the factors that uniquely affect them, as their stories have often been overlooked by society at large. Writing about southern African womanhood is thus an opportunity to shed light on oft-neglected stories and a chance to shed light on the specific challenges and struggles faced by southern African women. This is a topic about which much has been written both academically and non-academically and as such there is a wealth of resources and information to draw from. However, while much has been written on womanhood in general, and African womanhood in particular, this is an attempt to provide balanced and nuanced insight into southern African womanhood with a focus on Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Other writers have done this and so I follow where they have led. One of the most prominent writers to explore the womanhood of the Ndebele people is Yvonne Vera. In her novel, *Butterfly Burning* (1998), Vera details the struggles of a young umNdebele woman named Phephelaphi who seeks to live a self-determined and independent life. Much like the work on which this essay is based, the novel explores themes of belonging and the search for personal freedom, albeit without the other-worldly vehicles employed in *Like Water Like Stone*. Through Phephelaphi's journey Vera sheds light on the complexities of Ndebele womanhood and the challenges that women face in a male-dominated society. Sonto, on the other hand, is a representation of the complexities of Wester (Ndebele) womanhood and the challenges faced by one individual who is displaced by political forces, and her journey towards self-determination and purpose.

Another writer who has explored the experiences of amaNdebele women is NoViolet Bulawayo. In her novel *We Need New Names* (2014), Bulawayo tells the story of a young girl named Darling who grows up in a shack in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, and eventually leaves for greener pastures in America, where she discovers a new life and a new aspect of her identity. This novel also explores themes of displacement and belonging. Through Darling's experiences, Bulawayo illustrates the incredible strength of amaNdebele women in the face of adversity.

The women of Bulawayo – myself included – have been shaped by a complex and multifaceted experience that is fundamentally a long history of oppression, resistance, and resilience. Bulawayo is known as the 'City of Kings' for King Mzilikazi who founded it, and his son, King Lobengula who ruled after him, and the people of Bulawayo – anecdotally speaking – view themselves as a sort of aristocracy in exile and the court of that aristocracy. It is this perception of Bulawayo and its women that informed the character Sonto.

The lens through which I view the world and womanhood and therefore through which the characters in *Like Water Like Stone* are detailed is a womanist lens. The womanism I subscribe to is described by Clenorah Hudson-Weems in her 2004 text *Africana Womanist Theory* as 'a movement that is opposed to racism, classism and sexism and seeks Afrocentric solutions to challenges faced by African people whether they are on the continent or in the diaspora.' Every time I share this I am asked various iterations of 'why not feminism?' and my response is that it seems to me that feminists hold that gender is women's biggest oppressor, and while this is true for white women and women who have overcome class barriers with money, for the average (read: poor) southern African woman, race, class and gender are equally oppressive, and solutions that focus solely on gender often become irrelevant when applied to their context. Poor African women, it seems to me, partner with their men within their shared communities and together wage their battles against capitalism and racism. It is an unpopular opinion, but I am convinced that racism, capitalism, and classism are bigger threats to Black womanhood than sexism.

In her book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, American theorist, educator and social critic, bell hooks (2014), argues that Black women have been marginalized within both the mainstream feminist movement and the civil rights movement and that their experiences are unique and cannot be understood through either movement. hooks writes, "The black woman has never been able to separate her race from her sex, or her sex from her class, or her class from her race" (hooks, 2014). This is in keeping with the Africana Womanist theory of Hudson-Weems (2004) which holds that African women (and Black women in general) labour under the tripartite oppressions of race, class and sex.

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a Zimbabwean writer and filmmaker who explores the experiences of women in post-colonial Africa. Her seminal novel, *Nervous Conditions*, tells the story of Tambu who is struggling to overcome the limitations imposed on her by her gender and her culture. Dangarembga examines the impact of colonialism on Black

womanhood and how women can resist and overcome oppression (1988). The named writers highlight the unique challenges faced by Black women as they navigate the intersections of race, gender, and class, and they offer powerful examples of resistance and resilience which *Like Water Like Stone* also attempts to do.

Sonto's journey in *Like Water Like Stone* is one of movement from trying to fulfil expectations placed upon her by others to a state of agency where she has come to terms with her circumstances and found her own reasons for filling a particular role. The people around her – Thuli and Dwala in particular – start out with firm ideas of who Sonto is and who she needs to become in order to play the role set out for her, but they all eventually come to terms with Sonto as an agent in her own right and come to a place of acceptance of her self-determining ability.

In the pursuit of her goal, Sonto falls in love with the guardian, Ras. We see her grapple with the nature of their relationship until in that matter too she resolves to do that which she desires over that which is expected.

A major struggle I found in writing Sonto's story was writing it in such a way that it remained her story and did not become a story about her love life. This was because I wanted to portray a character who made life-affirming choices, but I was adamant that I did not want the story to become a lover story, as so many stories do in which the main character has a love interest. Sonto's relationship with Ras is important but it is not central to the story and so I kept the character of Ras in the background until the very end of the story. Bringing him into the foreground, detailing his story and giving a much bigger voice would I believe have changed the story and made it more of a romance rather than a quest undertaken by the protagonist. As the story stands, I feel that I have presented the relationship as one that is important to Sonto without making it the focal point of her story.

My first supervisor's comments on the work I was producing often revolved around the role of men in the story. He felt that Ras was not prominent enough in Sonto's story, that Sanuse was made too wicked to be believable, and that overall, the women were 'too loud' for women who were not strongly tied to men; that this was not an accurate representation of real-world, African, male-female dynamics. Perhaps Sonto's teacher could be her father, or I could make Sanuse a woman, but I absolutely had to give Ras a bigger role in Sonto's life and on the page. These were his suggestions.

I could not in good conscience follow his suggestions for two reasons: firstly, because this was not the story as it was coming to me, and secondly because I did not want to write a romance couched in fantasy. Sonto's love life was never intended to be the focal point of the story and I was adamant that I could write her relationship with Ras without making him second lead of the story. My supervisor was not the only one to question Ras's relatively minor role but he was the only one to make it about 'my feminism' (his words) by claiming that the only reason I didn't want to give Ras his 'true' place was my misandry which was in turn fuelled by feminism.

I am not a misandrist but neither do I identify as feminist. Sonto is written to be the principal mover in her story (barring interference by goddesses and gods) because I strongly believe that every woman should exercise as much agency over her own life as she can; that this is an inalienable right, and that patriarchy, religion and racism aided by capitalism make it seem – at least for poor, Black women not shielded from these oppressive forces by proximity to wealth or whiteness – as though a woman deciding what she wants for herself is exercising a privilege and not a human right.

Conclusion

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

– Maya Angelou

Like Water Like Stone came out of personal dreams which I wrote down as a private endeavour and which later evolved into the creative project that it now is. The narrative reflects elements of an otherworldly nature such as in reference to the 'Ancients', who are the real-world equivalent of amadlozi, and Ma, who is the creative force that begets the world and the mythology that surrounds Her and Her creation. This other world is also represented by characters such as Thuli and Dwala who are presented as non-human beings called godlings to reflect their divine nature, and in the activities of the healers and magic wielders, Sanuse, Nona, and Wisest, and in the experiences of Sonto herself. These choices were made very deliberately and while they are all fictional, they all have, to varying degrees, some relation to real-world cosmology, in particular Nguni cosmology.

The story began as a magical realist story, but I am now more comfortable with the classification of Africanjujuist as detailed elsewhere in this essay, simply because I feel

that that is a more accurate representation of what the story is and is intended to be. As a result, the narrative choices made in the work reflect my commitment to providing a positive portrayal of ubuNdebele, ubuNguni and the worldview and cosmology of this southern African group and southern Africa in general, albeit with a somewhat futuristic bent. The events detailed in the novel are pure fiction although based on a real history as discussed earlier.

The fictional world of Ekuthuleni, then, represents a real-world geography and history which have been tailored to fit the needs of the story because I sought to create a work that would contribute to conversations about what is possible for fiction from this part of the world. As an avid reader, I have wished and longed for more stories that reflect my reality, my culture and the mythology and cosmology of my people and so *Like Water Like Stone* is an attempt to produce one such story to add to those that have come from other writers.

I wanted to accomplish all of the above without centering White people and it is this, I believe, that gives *Like Water Like Stone* its near-unrecognisable quality if one were to compare and contrast it with the history of the region. The reference to Northers can be read (if one desires a historical rendition of the story) as a reference to White coloniser-settlers or it can be read simply as a reference to another people who once invaded the land of the story.

At the beginning of this essay, I stated that White people simply have nothing to do with this story, but further contemplation reveals that while this is true it is not the whole truth. There were instances (as in describing the Northers and their activities) that I could have made colonial involvement explicit, but I consciously chose not to do this. This choice was made partly as a rebellion against what I think of Western influence in African literature, and partly as an affirmation of the African right and ability to self-determine and self-describe outside of Western hegemonic influence.

As a writer – aspiring author – I could not help but think of the future of book publishing and possible future publication of my own work. I felt as though I had to decide whether I would write a story for its own sake, or write a story for publication. The decision was made for me by two things. The first was coming across the quote above from Maya Angelou. I consider Maya Angelou one of my writing godmothers although I have not read enough of her work to feel fully comfortable with that claim. Unlike Terry Pratchett, referenced earlier, about whose personal life I know very little, Angelou's life is in contrast far better known to me. I have watched her interviews and documentaries on here and feel

that I know and am inspired by her life as a woman who writes more than anything else. The second factor to the decision I made was a conversation held during one of the MA seminars where the topic was 'being true to the story.' This is something that resonated deeply with me as I have often felt othered by my writing, feeling that it is too 'out there' to be worth much and believing that it would get more traction if only I wrote for the audience. This may be personal hubris (I believe strongly that it is) but nonetheless I am convinced that book publishing as a whole has been infected by the disease of capitalism wherein writers write not what they want to write, but that which will sell. The hubris is that I believe I have resisted this urge and have successfully written a story that is 'true' and while I do hope for an audience, if I never find a multitude of readers my writerly conscience will remain clear.

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